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SCAR-FACE SAUL, The Silent Hunter; or, The Mystery of Fort Rane.

BY OLL COOMES,

AUTHOR OF "VAGABOND JOE," "KEEN KNIFE," "LASSO JACK," "THE BORDER KING," ETC., ETC.



BEFORE THE INDIAN HAD TAKEN A SWALLOW OF THE LIQUID, A PISTOL RUNG OUT, AND HIS GLASS WAS SHIVERED TO ATOMS IN HIS HAND.

Scar-Face Saul, THE SILENT HUNTER; OR, THE MYSTERY OF FORT RANE.

A Story of the Border.

BY OLL COOMES,
AUTHOR OF "VAGABOND JOE," "KEEN KNIFE," "LASSO JACK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

TOM RANE, THE RANGER.

An October day upon the Grand Prairie of Dakota, but it was a dark day pervaded with a humid atmosphere.

A fog had just swept over the great, boundless expanse, leaving it a trackless waste of ebony ashes.

The day was filled almost to obscurity with the black smoke that had risen from the burning plain. An object could not have been seen a mile away, although the sun was two hours high.

A horseman, with a grain, dust-covered face, suddenly drew rein in front of an emigrant-train and exclaimed:

"Well, by Judas, friends! it's no use talking, I can't tell no more where I'm going than if I were blind. I am lost!"

A cry of surprise and disappointment escaped the lips of the little band of emigrants.

In a moment the men were all out of their wagons and together discussing the situation; but in this they found no relief. They were without guide or compass. There was no other alternative but to wait till the sky cleared off, and that was not likely to be before the morning.

"Well," said Ishmael Bronson, the leader of the party, "we can go into camp and wait for the sun to direct our course. I see, now, it was a blunder in cutting across this prairie, in the first place; but then I was sure I could make my way without the least trouble."

The question thus settled, the wagons were being arranged in position for the night, when a strange horseman suddenly dashed out of the overhanging shadows and drew up in their midst.

He was a young man, scarcely five-and-twenty, and quite handsome. He had a keen, dark gray eye, a nose of the Grecian type, a black mustache, and dark hair that hung in wavy locks down his back. On his hand he wore a black felt hat with a slouch of trim and high, peaked crown. The rest of his garb was of navy-blue cloth, and fine buckskin handsomely wrought in fancy figures.

He carried a brace of pistols in his belt, and bestrode a clean-limbed gray mare that was caparisoned with a bespangled Mexican saddle and bridle.

As he drew up to the emigrants, he lifted his hat, and, bowing, said:

"Good-evening, strangers."

"Good-evening, sir," responded Ishmael Bronson. "I am surprised to find an emigrant train here in this prairie," the horseman said.

"Well, we're rather surprised at being here, ourselves," responded Bronson; "but who might you be, stranger?"

"Arnold Bush—settler, scout and ranchman, professionally."

"Well then, sir, you're the very man we've been wishing for," observed Bronson; "we're lost and want to get righted."

"Ah, indeed!" exclaimed Arnold Bush, as he caught sight of a face looking from one of the covered wagons—a face that caused him to start, for it was the face of Ada Bronson, and a fairer one he had never looked upon.

Ada was not over seventeen years of age, yet possessed a form perfect in all the attributes of womanhood. Dark, liquid eyes looked from beneath thick long, drooping lashes; this hue of health was upon her cheeks, and a wealth of golden brown hair was gathered back from the fair brow and confined by a jaunty lilac hat.

Arnold Bush was so struck with her beauty that he started as if from a dream, and scarcely aware of what he was doing, he lifted his hat and bowed to the maiden. Seeing his embarrassment Ishmael Bronson continued:

"Yes, we're lost, Mr. Bush, and if you can rightly we'll be under lasting obligations to you."

"I assure you I shall be pleased to serve you; which way are you bound?"

"To the Prairie Hill settlement."

"Prairie Hill lies south—you are headed west, I see," replied the horseman, and a changed expression seemed to pass over his face.

"How far is it to the first timber?" Bronson inquired.

"Ten miles to the Beaver Creek timber. You can just about make it by brisk driving by dark."

"Do you travel our way, Mr. Bush?"

"I do," replied the ranger, "but I am in a great hurry. I cannot, I am very sorry to inform you, journey with you."

"Then we'll be unable to make the creek over this ash-heap, without tree or shrub to guide us."

"I can fix that, stranger," said Arnold Bush; "just give me a lariat and I will drag it behind my horse, and you can follow the track."

"Good!" shouted several of the emigrants; and the desired lariat was taken from the foremost wagon and given the ranger.

"Time is precious, strangers," said Bush, "and I will have to be moving now. Be sure and follow the track of this lariat."

"Say, Bush," interrupted Bronson, "one more question: is there any danger in these diggin's?"

"There is some, I assure you; the Indians of late have been inclined to give us trouble. I think, however, you need have no fear at present. Good-day, my friends."

He lifted his hat as he spoke, at the same time casting a look of admiration toward the wagon in which sat the fair Ada, then he turned and galloped away.

The train at once set off across the grim, black plain, following the trail of the ranger's lariat. It crept slowly along, while the shadows seemed to be gathering around them.

At length the timber appeared in view before them, and, encouraged by the sight they urged on their animals. They were some four miles from the creek when another horseman suddenly rose up out of the plain before them. He was coming toward the train.

Ishmael Bronson and his daughter, both on horseback, rode forward to meet him.

"Good-evening, sir," said the old man, as they drew up face to face.

The stranger responded in a bold, friendly manner that pleased the emigrant and his daughter. He was quite a young man, in fact, a mere boy. He could not have been over twenty years of age, and yet he was possessed of a form that was a perfect model of physical manhood. His smooth boyish face was like an open book—full of intelligence, plain to be read. His eyes were decidedly wonderful in their expression. His head was well poised. His hair was closely cropped. He was dressed in the garb of a prairie ranger, and bestrode a dark-colored mustang. He carried a fine-looking rifle slung at his back. In his belt was a pair of revolvers and a hunting-knife.

Altogether, this youth was a handsome, dashing fellow who a gallant presence kindled a look of admiration in Ada's eyes.

"My boy," said Ishmael, "can you tell us how far it is to yon timber?"

"Five miles, I should think," was the prompt answer; "do you expect to reach there this evening?"

"I do, if it don't get too dark to follow that," said Bronson, pointing to the track of the lariat.

The boy glanced along the dim trail in the ashes then asked:

"Who made that trail?"

"A young ranger named Arnold Bush," replied Bronson.

"He certainly was unaware of what he was doing—if what he was leading you into. You'll be running great risk to follow that trail further."

"Great risk?" exclaimed Ishmael, "what do you mean?"

"I mean you'll find death and destruction where that trail touches the Beaver. No doubt the man that made it is dead ere this."

"Heavens! I hope not, for Arnold Bush, I am sure, was a noble fellow!" said the old man.

"He could not have been aware of the presence of danger, hereaway, I assure you," declared the boy; "however, do not encamp in that timber to-night."

"Your name, young man, if you please?" said Bronson.

"Tom Rane."

"The ranger?"

"Yes."

"Indeed?" exclaimed Bronson, for he had heard of Tom Rane before.

"Father, do not go further," begged the fair Ada, and Ishmael Bronson saw that the boy's words had carried conviction to his daughter's heart.

"There is no water here for our animals," the old man replied.

"Plenty of it, sir, right down in that depression. A little stream cuts its way through the prairie there," announced Tom Rane.

"Then we'll camp there," decided Bronson; "thank you, Tom."

Bronson and his daughter rode on toward the creek.

"Father," said the girl, thoughtfully, "why not invite the young ranger to stop with us over night? He might be of great service to us."

"Oh! pardon me, Ada, I'd forgot to be a gentleman," and the old man whirled his horse and rode back to where Tom sat upon his horse in silent meditation.

Ada rode on, and before she had reached the creek her father and the ranger overtook her.

"This is my daughter, Ada Bronson, Thomas Rane," was the old man's introduction.

Tom Rane lifted his hat and bowed politely. A blush mounted to the young people's faces, and from that moment the young ranger and Ada Bronson loved each other!

In a very short time the train was in camp on the little prairie creek—a thread of a stream meandering along in its deep, narrow channel and scarcely visible until you stood upon its banks.

"You're exposed here, Mr. Bronson," said Tom Rane, "and my advice would be to fortify. I see you have a 'sod-plow' in one of your wagons. With it you can turn up some of this tough prairie sod with which to build a little fort."

This was no sooner suggested than acted upon. A double team was harnessed to the plow and work began. The thick, tough sod was turned in a circle about the wagons, and with a spade cut into short blocks. These, men, women and children carried and laid up in a circular wall under the instructions of Tom Rane. In an hour's time quite a space had been inclosed by an impregnable sod wall two feet thick by four in height. And Ada Bronson called it Fort Rane.

The barricade had been constructed so that the little creek ran through the center of it—that they might not be cut off from water.

A corral was made for the stock by drawing the wagons into a hollow square; then a number of ropes were tied together and stretched around corral and camp in a circle and fixed about a foot from the ground. Another rope, with a bell attached to one end of it, ran from the fort to the encircling cord. Any one running against the outside rope would cause the bell to ring. It was a wise precaution.

Supper was soon over and guards posted. Tom Rane came and went at pleasure in the capacity of a scout.

Night came on. The sky was still overcast with a black, dismal fog. The darkness was intense.

Two lanterns lit up the interior of Fort Rane. Loaded rifles were leaning against the walls, and sharp eyes watched and keen ears listened.

Tents for the women and children had been pitched at one side of the inclosure, and after the usual evening worship of the little Christian band, all but the men retired.

The night wore slowly on. Tom Rane sat conversing with the emigrants in his free, pleasant way. All was silent save the subdued voices of the talkers and the murmur of the little stream down its narrow channel.

Finally Ishmael Bronson arose, and, taking a cup, went to the stream for a drink. Kneeling, he reached down into the dark channel. The cup struck something that seemed to move.

"Bring the light here!" he called out in manifest surprise.

A man came with a lantern when to the horror of the two they saw a tufted head and painted face suddenly appear above the bank of the stream.

A cry burst from Bronson's lips. It was answered by a savage yell, and at the same instant four more Indians sprung from the bed of the creek with drawn tomahawks. But, quick as a flash, Tom Rane whipped out his revolvers; there was a double flash and report, a yell and a groan and two savages fell dead. Nor were the emigrants slow to follow the young ranger's example, and in an instant, almost, four of the red-skins had paid for their daring with their lives, the fifth one escaping over the wall into the darkness. But, scarcely had this first assault been repelled ere the warning bell rung out and the dull thud of muffled hoofs, the shouts of men, and the yells of Indians burst upon the night.

"Great God!" cried Tom Rane, "the outlaws and Indians are upon us! To your posts men and fight like demons!"

Every man was on hand before the last word had fallen from his lips. Rifles and revolvers were brought into requisition. The cry, upon horseback, dashed up to the very wall of the fort. The emigrants poured a broadside into their ranks that emptied a dozen saddles. Still others pressed forward and one daring freebooter leaped his horse over the wall into the fort; but, right glad was he to leap out again for another volley from the brave defenders hurled the enemy back in wild confusion into the shadows of the distance.

"By heavens! the demons reckoned without their host," exclaimed Tom Rane when he saw that the enemy had fled.

"And but for you, Tom Rane, we would all have been slain," said Ishmael Bronson.

"I only regret one thing, Mr. Bronson," replied Rane, "and that is our failure to kill the daring devil that leaped his horse in among us, for it was the notorious outlaw and road-agent known as Con Robber, but whose real name is Conrad Robb."

An exclamation of surprise burst from the lips of the party.

In a few minutes order was restored and then preparations made in expectation of another attack; but to the happy surprise of all the night wore away without further demonstrations on part of the foe.

By sunrise the bodies of the dead robbers and Indians lying outside the fort were interred, and every trace of the night's conflict removed.

Shortly after breakfast a horseman carrying a white flag was seen approaching over the prairie. As he drew near Ishmael Bronson advanced to meet him. He was surprised when he discovered that he was dressed in the uniform of a United States soldier.

The two having saluted each other Bronson asked:

"Sir, do you wish a conference with us?"

"No," replied the trooper. "I have simply come to demand of you, in the name of the United States, the person of one Tom Rane, an inmate of your camp."

"Why do you make this demand?" asked Bronson.

"I don't know that I am under any obligations to make any explanations," replied the trooper; "but, sir, he is a villain, if not the outlaw, Con Robber, himself."

Ishmael Bronson started. At first a look of surprise and pain passed over his face; but this was soon followed by one of distrust and indignation; and in a tone that was as emphatic as it was resolute, he said:

"By my consent you can never have Tom Rane! He is no robber, and the whole United States Army couldn't change my mind."

"Then you will have to take the consequences," replied the trooper, and turning his horse he galloped away.

Bronson started back but before he had reached his friends, a score of horsemen appeared on the plain and came charging down toward the fort. They were Indians and outlaws.

"Now, men, stand to your arms," said gallant

Tom Rane as he fixed his eyes upon the approaching enemy.

The foe scattered out as they neared the fort. They were still some four hundred yards from the emigrants when the boy ranger rested his rifle on the top of the sod-fort, and taking aim at one of the savages, fired.

A cry of astonishment burst from the lips of his friends for they saw the Indian throw up his arms and fall from his animal's back. It was the most remarkable shot they had ever seen made.

With all the coolness of an old warrior the young rifleman repeated the shot with equal success. A third shot was made and a third savage fell. The emigrants were completely dumbfounded. Such marksmanship seemed miraculous. The enemy, equally surprised, withdrew as far as eight hundred yards from the fort. Tom Rane measured the distance with his keen eyes, then began reloading his rifle, saying:

"That is a long shot, but I'm going to try that fellow on the gray horse."

"Blazes!" exclaimed Bronson, "that's all of half a mile. If you make that shot, you're a wizard."

He laid his rifle on the wall and rubbed his hand along the bronzed barrel as if to impart some of his own magnetism to the weapon. Then he glanced through the sights and gradually elevating the muzzle of the piece, fired.

Every eye was fixed upon the white horse, and while the report was still ringing in their ears, they saw its rider move to and fro in his saddle and then fall to the earth.

A shout burst from the lips of the men. Ishmael Bronson rushed forward, and grasping the lad's hand, said:

"Boy, you're a living wonder! God bless you!"

"Tom," said a timid, sweet young voice, and Ada Bronson came forward with tears of joy and delight in her eyes. "I am going to confer upon you a badge of honor—you have certainly won it."

She took from her own throbbing breast a beautiful breast-pin of turquoise set in gold, and fastened it upon the young ranger's breast.

"Thank you, fair Ada," he said, a light of manly pride and joy beaming in his handsome face.

The emigrants applauded the maiden's noble act.

Tom Rane felt rejoiced by the flattering honors conferred upon him, but he received all with that calm, unostentatious dignity so characteristic of one of nature's noblemen.

The enemy hovered around all day upon the plain like vultures, and when night again set in they made another attack upon the fort; but Tom Rane was prepared for them and they were repulsed with heavy loss. And thus for three days and nights the siege was kept up in hopes of compelling the emigrants to yield, but in vain; and so upon the fourth day the foe retired and the train was enabled to resume its journey.

Tom Rane accompanied the emigrants, and in the course of three days they came in sight of the Prairie Hill Settlement, the end of their journey. When about a mile from the village the young ranger drew up, saying:

"Mr. Bronson, I will go no further. You are now beyond danger. I will go my way."

"Tom, what do we owe you?"

"Your good-will—nothing else," replied Tom; "I would not receive pay for my services. I feel, in a measure, repaid for all I have done for you, and only wish I could serve you longer. With your permission, Mr. Bronson, I would like to speak a word to Miss Ada before I leave you."

"Certainly; I will send her to you," the old man said, and he went in search of the maiden.

Tom stood leaning against his horse when Ada approached, her eyes filled with the tears she could not keep back.

"Tom," she said, with a tremor in her voice, "father tells me you are going to leave us."

"I am. You folks have no further need of me, Ada. Yonder is your future home—the end of your long, dangerous journey."

"But for you, Tom, we would never have reached here," the maiden said; "but, Tom, won't you come and see us sometime?"

"Is it your wish that I should, Ada?"

"Yes, Tom, it is."

"Bless you, Ada; I wish I could have you in my presence always; but this badge you bestowed upon me at the fort will ever keep your face bright in my memory. Oh, Ada! you may think me a silly boy, but will you forgive me if I tell you that I love you dearly?"

Ada's eyes fell and a crimson flush mounted to her face.

"Tom," she murmured, "it is pleasant to know I am loved by one so noble and generous and brave as you."

"Thank you, Ada; then my love is not in vain?"

"No, Tom, it is not," she replied with a quivering voice, and her little hand crept into the brown palm of the ranger.

"Oh, what a joy it is to hear this!" he exclaimed. "I can now go upon my journey with a light and happy heart."

"And when may I expect to see you again, Tom?"

"You may see me soon, I hope; and then you may not. The commandant of Fort Laramie sent for me, and he may give me some work to do that will keep me away a month or two. But I will come soon or late. I shall never forget you for a moment, Ada. I know. This is one of the happiest moments of my life; the other was when you put this badge of honor upon my breast where it shall remain as long as my heart is warm."

"Tom, for my sake be very careful of your life," pleaded Ada.

"I will, darling," he replied, and stooping he kiss-

ed her fair brow, then pressing her little hand, and bidding her good-by, he mounted his horse and waving an adieu to the emigrants, galloped away, his heart beating wildly, joyfully.

His course lay through a belt of timber; he passed this and entered the open plain beyond. He had scarcely ridden a hundred rods into the prairie when a score of rifles in the woods behind him pealed out, and both horse and ranger sunk to earth, while forth from the woods like demons burst twenty painted and plumed savages—each one eager to be the first to secure the scalp of Tom Rane the young ranger.

CHAPTER II.

LEFT TO HIS FATE.

In a few moments the screaming horde of savages was gathered around the dying horse of Tom Rane; but to their surprise and disappointment the body of the fallen ranger was not there! In fact, he had not been hit at all, and the instant his horse fell he crept away on all fours through the grass which was waist deep. With a yell the red-skins scattered out in search of him. Bending over in their stirrups they searched the tall grass closely, carefully.

But, Tom Rane had crawled rapidly away—several rods from where his horse fell. He soon saw, however, that he could not escape, and drawing his revolver he turned over on his back and awaited the worst. Nor had he long to wait. A savage rode alongside of him and the eye of the ranger met those of the foe. Then, quick as a flash, the youth thrust the muzzle of his revolver into the Indian's face and fired. The warrior, with scarcely a groan, fell dead, and, leaping to his feet, Rane, rung upon the back of the fallen man's pony and fled away over the plain, pursued by the yelling horde of Indians and outlaws.

It was a desperate race in which every energy of both pursuers and pursued were called into action. The fear of the torture-stake actuated the young ranger, while the desire for vengeance fired the breasts of the savages.

Over the plain the race continued. They crossed one prairie, forded a small stream and entered another prairie from which the grass had been swept by fire—the same upon which the emigrants had erected Fort Rane.

Straight toward this deserted camp the ranger headed his horse. The sun was almost down when he reached the little sod fort but a few hundred yards in advance of his pursuers.

Dismounting he bounded inside the barricade and drew his revolvers. The enemy came on. He opened fire upon them. A savage went down at every shot, but the survivors knew he was alone and pressed on. They reached the fort, leaped from their horses and scaled the walls.

"Surrender!" cried a voice in plain English, emphasizing the demand with a frightful oath.

The brave young ranger backed into a corner determined to sell his life most dearly. The Indians and outlaws, for there were a number of the latter, seemed determined upon taking him alive and rushed upon him. But Tom Rane seemed just as determined as they in his course. He knew that death would be the result of his capture and he resolved to die fighting. He grasped the clubbed rifle from the hands of an outlaw, and swung it around him with deadly violence—a whip of iron in a hand of steel. The outlaws fell right and left. The young ranger seemed invincible, inspired. His eyes blazed with an unearthly light; his teeth were set, and his whole being seemed surrounded and imbued with a preternatural power.

He kept a space cleared before him, but his foes, hideous in their savage disguise, pressed upon him, and the unequal conflict was suddenly ended. A robber, with a rope made into a noose, climbed the wall behind the brave youth and dropped it about his head and shoulders and drew him against the bank, helpless, powerless.

"Cowards!" the brave prisoner cried, "you have won, but it was by striking at my back!"

"Yes, my fine game-cock," said a man in a horrible disguise, who was none other than Con Robber, the outlaw chief, "and I am sorry you have but one life to give us in atonement for my men that you have slain. Curses upon you! you have thwarted me more than once, the past few days, and shall die the death of a miserable dog. Men, bring four picket-pins at once."

The pins were brought and driven into the earth. Tom Rane was thrown upon the ground and his hands and feet securely tied to the pins. In this position he was entirely helpless.

"Now, men," said Con Robber, "you can sit in judgment upon Tom Rane; and in doing so let your deliberations be actuated by the memory of the comrades he has slain."

"That we will, cap'n," averred a bloodthirsty wretch.

The shadows of night had fallen, dark and dismal.

Night-birds skimmed along the prairie and beat the air with their hollow wings.

Wolves howled in the distance.

The question as to the captive's punishment came upon for discussion, but, ere the outlaws could settle the matter, the sound of many hoofs broke suddenly up their ears, and looking westward they could just discern, through the deepening gloom, a large body of horsemen sweeping down upon them.

"They are troops!—government horse!" cried a dozen voices, and in their sudden alarm and surprise, every man ran out of the fort, vaulted upon the back of his horse and fled.

As they dashed past the little fort, several of the robbers drew their revolvers and fired at the pros-

trate form of Tom Rane, from whose lips rose a cry of agony.

The blare of a bugle sounded a charge, and then the cavalry were in hot pursuit of the robbers and their red allies. Down past the little fort where lay the brave young ranger charged the troopers, and away into the distance they sped at a wild break-neck speed. Tom shouted to them, but the pounding of their horses' hoofs drowned his voice.

Gradually the beating hoof-strokes died away in the distance and all became silent as the grave.

An hour passed and the moon floated out of the east into a clouded sky.

The howl of a wolf was the first sound to break the awful stillness of the hour. Then the grim, shaggy beast came loping over the plain, guided by the scent of blood. With stealthy, cautious footsteps he approached the little fort. At the entrance he stopped and sniffed the air, then turned and sent forth a long, plaintive and significant howl that sent terror to the heart of the helpless boy.

From several points this scavenger of the plain was answered, and in a short time he was joined by a score of comrades. Then, together, they all set up a gibbering howl, advancing and receding toward the fort as if mustering courage for an attack.

At length one of the leaders ventured inside the sod wall, and a moment later a wail of human agony quavered forth upon the night. Then the wolves rushed inside in a body and began their carnival.

The moon, as if in sorrow, buried her face behind a cloud, and the blackness of death overshadowed the plain.

CHAPTER III.

SCAR-FACE SAUL.

PRAIRIE HILL settlement was a frontier village, the size and population of which has nothing in particular to do with our story; suffice it to say, however, that it was strong enough to defy, in a measure, the aggressions of the Indian and free booter. It was, as most of such villages are, a nucleus for a large number of adventurers, cattlemen, and hunters and trappers; and besides the acquisitions necessary for the convenience and comfort of the place, one Heinrich Strahl, a German by descent and of very doubtful character, had opened a gambling den and whiskey shop under the colors of a trading-post—claiming to have a sub-agency from the general government agent at another point. But, be this as it may, it was certain that Strahl's agency was the evening resort of the ruffians of Prairie Hill, and the scene of many disgraceful brawls.

It is about sunset of a summer evening, some six or eight months after the events narrated in the foregoing chapters, that we introduce the reader to Strahl's agency.

A light had just been struck and Strahl's ranch, as the place was more familiarly known, had been put in order for the evening. Heinrich was hardly expecting any one, when a step was heard at the door, and, turning, the agent was startled by the presence of a stranger.

And such a stranger!

He was possessed of the robust, athletic form of a young man, but his hair—which was worn long—was white as snow, and his face and neck were knotted and welled with terrible red scars that defaced and disfigured him. His eyes were covered with a pair of green goggles that lent an additional look to the deformity of his face.

He was dressed in a suit of buckskin, and wore a gray slouched hat. He was armed with an old-fashioned Kentucky rifle, a hunting-knife and brace of revolvers.

"Well, ry gollies!" exclaimed Old Strahl, in astonishment, "who tes dis low? Rein great slon-billies!"

"Saul Hayden's my name," the stranger replied, in a loud tone.

"Saul Hay-den? Mein Gott, mein somebodies spiles your free most awful nuch!"

"If you'd been lugged by leers, torn by panthers, and tortured by Indians as I have been, you'd have a spilt face, too," replied the stranger.

"Ish cot so? Well, y shemilly, Scar-Face, dat ish a bad mess ov face, but it ish my treat. Wat you drinks?"

"Nothing stronger than water," replied the scar-face.

"Oh, mein Gott! Wat kind of a fellers ish it dat you is, eh?" asked the agent; "don't drink no-tings, eh?"

"No, but I'll eat—I'm hungry now; I've traveled for two days without anything to eat."

"Well, icw, dat scures good, for I ish got nice things to eat and some tobacco and slust two barls ov whiskey."

Scar-Face Saul ordered some venison, chicken and crackers, and, seating himself in a dark corner, began his evening meal.

About this time four other men came steering into the agency. They were cattlemen, and had come "for a night of it." Old Heinrich greeted them joyfully.

The man in the corner arrested the cattlemen's attention the moment they entered.

"What's that you've got there, Strahl?" asked one.

"Dot ish one stranger, and he ish got one of de worse mixed up faces dot you most never see. He ish a hunter."

"Well, give us some liquor, Strahl, and presently we'll look after him; roven of doubtful character 'lowed 'round here, ye know."

The four sat down at a rube table and were provided with a bottle of whiskey and glasses; each, a pack of cards.

All four of these bullwhackers were rude, rough

men with faces that denoted a want of principle and humane feeling.

They drank freely and often, and soon began to feel the effects of the liquor. They grew noisy and profane, and ever and anon threw out some remark about the stranger eating silently in the corner. The latter, however, never turned his head—was totally indifferent to what was going on around him. At last, he appeared so.

A few minutes later another person entered the ranch. It was an Indian, a friend of the whites, known as Topeka—a strange, peculiar fellow—silent and unobtrusive, yet feared and admired because there was something mysterious about him.

Strahl received him kindly, and with surprise, for never had Topeka entered his house before, after midnight.

The four cattlemen yelled at him in a drunken way, that was answered by a withering scowl and contemptuous grunt from the Indian, for he was both sensitive and suspicious.

For the first time the man in the corner was seen to look around—glance at Topeka, the quartette; but only to resume his eating.

Two of the men at the table rose and went out and around the cabin. They stopped near the corner in which Scar-Face Saul was seated and entered into a conversation. Saul leaned against the wall and appeared to be in deep thought.

In a few minutes the two men came back and went to the bar called drinks for five.

If Topeka had a fault, it was that one peculiar to all Indians—his inordinate love of liquor. This the bullwhackers knew, and it seemed, now, as if they intended to take advantage of it and get him drunk.

Strahl poured the liquor and then one of the cattlemen passed Topeka a glass brimming full.

"Here, now," said one of the men, raising his glass, "is luck to Topeka, the brave friendly."

Then all lifted their glasses to their lips, but before the Indian had taken a swallow of the liquid, a pistol back in the corner rung out, and his glass was shivered to atoms in his hand.

With an exclamation of surprise every eye was instantly turned and fell upon the silent man in the corner who sat regarding them, a smoking pistol in his hand.

"What for you does dat?" yelled Old Strahl.

"Ugh!" ejaculated the Indian, in apparent surprise, "Scar-Face Saul," and he walked over and shook hands with the mysterious stranger.

Old Strahl followed and said, shaking his fist at Saul, his eyes glaring like a mad bull's:

"You shust bays me for dat glass and rum or I shust mix your face up worse dan it ish."

Without adding a word, Scar-Face Saul paid the fellow a dollar for his damages.

"Dot am goo!—dot very mooch satisfy me."

"But it don't satisfy us," said Jack Marley, a burly bullwhacker who seldom came to the agency without whipping somebody; "no stranger, with a countenance as badly split as yours, can come in here and insult that brave Indian and Jack Marley."

"You are no friend of Topeka's," replied the white-haired man.

"Far'n't, ar'n't?" snarled Marley, squaring off for a fight.

"No," responded Saul; "I have ears. When you went out just a few moments ago, you accused Topeka of the murder of one of your men. You forgot I sat here."

"Blast your heart!" yelled Marley, "you are a sneak and a spy, and I demand satisfaction for insultin' us."

"You can have it, sir," responded the stranger, rising to his feet and facing the bullwhacker.

Marley, in an endeavor to get the advantage, aimed a blow at the man's head as he rose from his seat, but Saul seemed to have anticipated him, and warding the blow with his right hand, dealt him one at the same instant with the left that sent him to the floor ten feet away.

"Shoot deschampi! shoot! shoot shoot!" screamed Old Strahl, rushing toward the white-headed stranger, but the next thing he knew, he too, received a blow that jerked him fairly out of his slippers.

By this time Marley had regained his feet, and with the blood spouting from his nose, rushed upon his antagonist; but it was only to go down again by a blow from the fist of the mysterious stranger. His comrades came to his rescue, but they were awkward and clumsy in liquor and were soon placed *hors du combat*.

At this juncture Topeka slipped around and turned a gallon measure over the light, wrapping the room in an almost blinding darkness.

A general confusion and storm of oaths ensued; but they lasted for only a few brief moments when the Indian uncovered the light.

"Where's that gogged-eyed, fender?" stormed Marley, frantic with rage.

"Here," said a low, calm and placid voice, and turning, the cattlemen saw the object of his wrath standing in the door with a revolver in each hand leveled full upon him; while, near by, stood Topeka with his tomahawk raised, his body inclined slightly forward and his eyes blazing with deadly emotion. The Pawnee had taken sides with Scar-Face.

"Advance one step, and you are a dead man," said Scar-Face Saul in slow, measured accents that did not fail to carry conviction with them.

The four bullwhackers were taken completely by surprise. They were spellbound—terror-stricken. In the dim glow of the light they caught the gleam of Saul's eyes through his glasses and they seemed to burn into their very souls. These men had never known fear before, but now felt themselves motion-

less under the strange and powerful magnetism of the mysterious man. Not a word was given in reply to the latter, and for two minutes a dead hush reigned. Then Saul gave utterance to a contemptuous laugh that was followed by a disdainful ejaculation from Topeka, and turning, the two walked out of the room and disappeared in the night.

The cattlemen breathed a breath of relief, and Old Strahl once more found his powers of speech.

"Mein Gott!" he exclaimed in abject fear; "dem mens ish devils!—mean devils, with hoofs, horns, and tails, so help me!"

Marley started toward the door, but Strahl stopped him.

"Shoop, Shack," he cried; "dey will shoot you—oh! I ish weak in my body!—mine legs all trimbles. Coom, let us git some strength."

He filled up five glasses, brimming full.

"Men," said Marley, his face white with his emotions, and his hand trembling till the liquor spilled; "this is something we have never experienced. I tell you, that man with the white hair and the goggles is possessed of a thousand devils!"

"And that man Topeka is his friend," added a comrade.

"No man!" continued Marley at the top of his lungs, "has ever struck me with impunity, and that man Saul shall not go unpunished; neither shall that murderous Indian. Mark my words, boys, and let it sink deep into your hearts, that, *vengeance is mine and that I will surely repay!* DRINK!"

They drained their glasses. A man entered the saloon and handed Marley a paper. Upon it was written:

"Marley, come to the cabin at once—hurry."

"ARNOLD BUSH."

CHAPTER IV.

ADA BRONSON'S TROUBLES.

PRairie Hill settlement lay quiet under the summer sky.

The forests were clad in their rustling robes and the prairies carpeted with green and strewn with flowers.

The deer and her mate wandered through the woods and over the plain undisturbed, and the bright-eyed bird and her mellow-throated companion warbled and sung in the halls of their silvan retreat.

All nature seemed in her happiest mood, and all creatures happy save the pale-face girl that sat half dreaming on the banks of the little lake that lay just outside the village of Prairie Hill.

That maiden was Ada Bronson—the fair Ada whom we left a few months previous so bright, so gay. Now she sat mourning the loss of her lover; for months had passed since she had parted with Tom Rane, the gallant, handsome young ranger; and in all that time she had not seen, nor even heard one word of him.

Had Tom's love grown cold? or had he been killed?

These were the questions the maiden had asked herself a thousand times, but nothing save the pain in her heart answered. Still she waited and watched. Hope had not entirely died out in her breast, though her sorrow and suspense were dimming the luster of her eyes and paling the roses in her cheeks.

One thing that gave weight to the doubt and uncertainty of Ada's mind was, that Tom Rane and the outlaw band of Con Robber, had disappeared from the stage of action about the same time. It was well known that the military had broken up the robbers' organization, and as Tom's name had often been used in connection with that of the freebooters, there were those who were inclined to cast reflections upon the character of the young ranger.

Ada was seated upon a log watching a number of beautiful swans disport themselves in the glassy waters of the lakelet. They were her pets. They had been caught when quite young in one of the northern lakes and presented to her by an old hunter. There were twelve of them, and as their snowy breasts plowed the waters of the lake a smile of admiration lit up the sad face of the fair young girl.

"They are very pretty, Ada."

Ada started at sound of that voice and looked up. Arnold Bush, he whose lariat trail the emigrants had followed months before over the burnt prairie, stood before her, hat in hand.

"Oh, it is you, Mr. Bush!" she exclaimed, slightly embarrassed, though endeavoring to appear calm.

"Call me Arnold, Ada, I tell you for the fiftieth time," he said, gently reproving her; and taking off his hat he threw himself upon the sward at her feet; "this"—he continued, "is a very beautiful day."

"A very pleasant day, indeed," she replied, rather indifferently.

Arnold Bush's face wore a restless, troubled look, and Ada was not slow in noticing it, for it was the first time she had ever seen the tranquillity of his countenance disturbed.

Mr. Bush had made Prairie Hill a permanent location about the time Ishmael Bronson's party located there. He was engaged in an extensive cattle trade in connection with some eastern capitalists. That is, Bush, assisted by a score of men, did the buying, the herding and selling, and the others furnished the capital and shared the profits.

The young ex-ranger stood high in the estimation of the settlers although there were some who could not place implicit confidence in him from the fact of his being a little reckless and addicted to the bowl, and his always keeping the worst class of men in his employ.

"Watching your pets are you, Ada? You must take great delight in their company," the ex-ranger continued.

"I do," she responded.

"I wish I could be as happy with my herds as you are, Ada, but I cannot."

"You seemed troubled to-day, Mr. Bush," the maiden said.

"There goes that *Mister*, again!" he said shortly, yet with a smile; "please don't forget, Ada. Yes, I am in trouble. Nothing yet has been found or heard of Jack Marley, and just to-day the third one of my herders was found dead."

"Oh dear! dead? exclaimed Ada, excitedly.

"Yes, dead—shot through the heart, and upon his shirt was a paper bearing those same terrible words: '*Vengeance is mine and I will surely repay.*' It was signed, 'Nemesis.' These words, I am told, were uttered once by Jack Marley at Strahl's agency; and I have often wondered since Jack so mysteriously disappeared, in what relation the words stood to his disappearance. Nemesis is the mythological name for the goddess of divine vengeance; but, why my men should be the object of divine wrath, more than the rest of humanity, I am unable to say. But Nemesis, whoever he or she may be, must and will be hunted down."

"You don't think any woman has anything to do with such bloody deeds, do you?" Ada asked.

"The name is feminine, and that's all I know about it more than that the deeds of Nemesis are devilish, cowardly and inhuman. To-morrow we will inaugurate a general search for the destroyer and hunt till he is found; but, Ada, I did not come here to fill your ears with stories of bloodshed, but to ask you again for an answer to my question of months ago; will you be my wife?"

"I answer you now as then—I cannot answer your question yet," she replied, a little bitterly.

"Not yet?" he exclaimed with a look of disappointment; "that has been your answer a dozen times. Ada, do you love another?"

Ada made no reply, but looked out over the lake with tears in her eyes, and a sigh upon her lips. Arnold Bush, with the cruelty of a desperate lover, repeated his question.

"Mr. Bush," she replied, her voice tinged with sarcasm, "you have no right to ask me such questions. If I should love another that is my heart's own sacred secret."

"To be sure," he replied with mock suavity; "but if no other has a claim upon your affections you could surely give me a hearing; at least you could say yes or no."

"I do not love you, then," she replied, "and so I hope that we now understand each other."

"Yes, we do, Ada," he said firmly; "good-day, Miss Bronson," and he rose and walked rapidly away.

Ada Bronson burst into tears when he had disappeared from sight, and while she sat with bowed head, absorbed in her troubles, a shadow crossed her path. Lifting her eyes she saw a man standing before her. It was Scar-Face Saul, the Silent Hunter.

He lifted his hat and bowed politely, saying:

"How d'ye do, Miss Bronson?"

"Why, it is you, Saul!" she replied in surprise.

"Yes, indeed, little one, and I'm sorry to see you a-weepin'. Are ye in trouble, Ada?" he asked, manifesting a kind, child-like sympathy for the maiden's tears.

"Yes, Saul, indeed I am in trouble," she confessed.

"Too bad, too bad," he said with a sigh; "one so young should not have trouble. I know how it is myself, Miss Bronson—I speak from experience."

"Then you have seen trouble, Saul?" Ada asked.

"Trouble and sufferin'," he answered; "my white hairs bear witness to the one, my deformed face to the other."

"But the soul is not deformed, Saul," Ada said; "no true man or woman notices the deformities of the face and body if the soul is a pure and true one."

"Is that true, Miss Bronson?" the gray-haired man asked hopefully. "I have shunned everybody as much as possible because I was afraid my deformities might be repulsive."

"You are too sensitive, Saul," the noble, kind-hearted girl replied; "I assure you such is not the case. I have always heard you spoken of in terms of praise. Our people like you because they know you to be a brave, honest, quiet and inoffensive man, so do not stay away on that account. I know men with fine forms and faces but their souls are deformed, and they are loathsome and repulsive. Yes, Saul, it's the soul not the face that true people look at."

"Ah, God bless you, Miss Bronson! You talk like a woman of fifty, and I feel better of having met you. But now I will move on and not intrude longer on the privacy of your retreat, for there must be some associations lingering about this place that bring you here day after day to while away the hours."

"How do you know, Saul, that I come here so often?" she questioned.

"I've heard so," he said smiling, "but then, I presume you come to watch your swans. Ah, ar'n't they beautiful? How deliciously their snowy breasts cleave the water! No deformity there—no trouble, no sorrow. Beautiful birds! But, I'd forgot to tell ye, Ada, that trouble from the Indians is expected. In fact, they've already been doin' some devilry up the country, and they may steal down hereaways. Do be careful, till ye know that's no danger."

"Thank you, Saul, thank you," the maiden said, gratefully; "you are very kind."

Saul bid her good-by and turned and walked proudly away. Ada could not help watching him. There was something in him to be admired even more than the handsome Arnold Bush. Moreover, he seemed so thoughtful of her safety, and of such a kind and

sympathetic nature, that one could not help liking him.

"Poor Scar-Face!" she said, as he disappeared from sight; then she turned and glanced out over the lake. The slanting rays of the declining sun fell upon the bosom of the water. She saw her swans coming in—moving slowly and majestically toward her. She counted them—there were just twelve. A look of joy and surprise lit up her face. The night before three of them had stayed out, and she was afraid they had been killed. Even now the same three lagged behind as if by a guilty conscience.

Ada called them. They moved faster. The nine in the lead soon came ashore, smoothed their plumage, and gathered about their young mistress. Ada had a name for each one. She called the three that were still out on the water; but they refused to come nearer—stood still upon the lakelet.

A light canoe lay upon the beach. Pushing it into the water, the maiden stepped into it, and, seating herself, paddled out into the lake. As she approached her truant pets, they separated and moved off in different directions, and with a strange, awkward gait.

Again the maiden called them by name, but they heeded her not. They continued to shy off. Ada plied the paddle faster and soon ran alongside one of the fowls. A cry of horror burst from her lips. The paddle dropped from her hand and her eyes became riveted upon the water. Down under the bird, in the clear liquid depths, she beheld a human form—the form of a savage whose head was above water, but covered with the feathered skin of the swan. At the same instant she beheld a pair of black, gleaming orbs glaring at her through the downy breast of the bird as though they would pierce her very soul.

A scream burst from the poor girl's lips. It rung across the lakelet and quavered through the forest.

The next instant the three feathered disguises were thrown aside, and the half-nude warriors seized the maiden, hurried her ashore and away into the forest. Alas! poor Ada was a captive!

But her cry had reached the ears of a friend, and a few moments later Scar-Face Saul was on the trail of the Indians.

CHAPTER V.

A STRANGE MYSTERY.

LIKE a sleuth-hound upon the trail, Scar-Face Saul came creeping back to the lake among the shrubbery, his form half crouching and his rifle at a trail. He had removed his goggles, and as keen a pair of eyes as ever lighted a human face, searched the surroundings. The man's very soul seemed transformed into that of another being. His scars and facial deformities were eclipsed by the light of his wonderful eyes. He took up the trail of the savages, and with the ease and silence of a born trapper he glided away. The perspiration started from his face. He pushed back his long snowy locks; his brow became knit, his teeth set with the intensity of his emotions.

Meanwhile, the news of Ada's capture spread like wildfire through the village.

A man passing on the opposite side of the lakelet had seen her captured and carried away.

In a few minutes a dozen men were off in pursuit, Ishmael Bronson taking the lead.

Arnold Bush, forgetting his rejection by Ada, joined the pursuers, and was one of the most eager and fearless in the pursuit.

They went down to the lake and there took the trail. The way lay through the dark, green woods, but it was plain enough. Only three savages had been seen when Ada was captured, yet the trail showed the tracks of four men. They were all moccasin tracks, but the toes of one of them turned outward, which fact told the pursuers that a white man had gone that way also.

Evening was drawing near and, to the regret of Mr. Bronson, they had to give up the pursuit for the day and go into camp.

The party bivouacked on the banks of a little purling stream, and from their supply of rations made their evening meal. Then guards were stationed, and all laid down to rest. They lit no fire. The night was dark. The hours dragged wearily by. At midnight the guards were changed, and an additional one put upon the force.

But few of the party slept soundly. Ishmael Bronson slept not at all. All was silent as the grave save the voices of the wood, but these made the silence more intense—the loneliness of the place more lonely. But suddenly the report of a firearm was heard, apparently in the very midst of the sleepers. A groan followed. One of the party had been shot.

In a moment every man was upon his feet, but all was silent save the death-rattle in the throat of a comrade.

Louis Estelle was found dying. He was a French half-breed. Arnold Bush spoke to him, but there was no response—he was dead. He was one of Bush's men—a cattle-herder.

"Who fired that murderous shot?" was asked by many.

No one could answer positively.

"I know one thing," said Ishmael Bronson; "he has not been killed by an enemy—I mean an outsider. I have not slept a wink to-night, and I have heard the chirrup of every cricket and the sound of every creeping insect near camp. No one has entered our midst. Estelle must have shot himself accidentally. You know we have all been sleeping, or trying to sleep, on our arms."

"I will see," Bush declared.

He took up the man's rifle and cocking it pulled the trigger. The hammer fell with a dull click—the gun was unloaded, and there in the darkness was given the verdict—"Died by the accidental discharge of his own rifle."

Thus the matter was settled, and the body of the dead being covered with some green boughs, the party, sad at heart, sat down to await the coming of day. Not another eye was closed in sleep that night again.

Day finally dawned, and the first thing to be done was to inter the body of Estelle. With their knives and hands the men hollowed out a shallow grave. Four men went to bring the body to its sepulcher. Arnold Bush removed the covering of boughs, and as he did so a cry of horror burst from his lips. He saw a paper pinned to the man's shirt front, and stooping he tore it away.

"My God!" he exclaimed, "Estelle is the victim of Nemesis!"

The men gathered around him when he read aloud these words in a trembling voice:

Vengeance is mine and I will surely repay."

Every lip paled. Horror was stamped upon each face. The men looked strangely from one to the other. Fear and distrust of each other rose in the breasts of many.

"What mystery is this?" questioned Ishmael Bronson.

"God only knows," answered the man at his side.

"I know," continued the old man emphatically, "that no man entered our midst last night. I would stake my life upon it."

"And I too," said one of the men that was on guard at the time the fatal shot was fired.

"And I," added another.

"Well, admitting Estelle killed himself, who put that badge of death on his breast?" asked Bush, running his eagle eyes over the faces around him; "it can't be possible that Nemesis is among us?"

Not a man replied. All seemed thunderstruck, spellbound. There was full a minute's silence—a silence that made every one restless, and none more so than Arnold Bush. Each man felt that the eye of suspicion was upon him.

Rupert Hall, a handsome, manly youth of twenty years, was the first to speak—to refute the possibility of such a charge.

"No," he said, "while I have waited for older heads to speak I do not think it possible for Nemesis to be among us. I believe every man here is a gentleman—not an assassin."

"That's so! Amen!" shouted several voices.

And so they dropped the subject from discussion, but not from their minds. There were those who still believed the avenger was among them—even had their suspicions of who it was.

Louis Estelle was buried and the pursuit continued. Rupert Hall acted in the capacity of trailer, nor was it the first time the young boy settler had followed the red-skins' trail.

They pressed on until the trail struck the Cheyenne river. A canoe lying upon the opposite shore told where and how the cunning red-skins had crossed with the captive.

Rupert Hall swam the river and brought the canoe over. Then he took six men aboard, paddled them to the opposite shore and returned for the others. He was about half-way across with the second load when a human form, floating on the surface of the river, lodged against the side of the boat.

An exclamation of surprise and horror burst from the lips of the settlers.

The face of the floating stranger was that of an old man. The form was almost nude. There was a long knife in his girdle. His eyes were half closed like those of a dead person, and, in fact, the settlers supposed he was dead. But, when he touched the side of the boat, he opened his eyes, compressed his lips as if invoking silence, then said in a low tone:

"Pull me in, boys—snake me out of this dasted wet water."

Without adding a word, two stout men pulled the old water-waif into the boat. A smile began to light up the old fellow's thin, comical, good-natured face. His little gray eyes snapped and danced with the fire of a wild, reckless spirit.

"Old man," said Ishmael Bronson, "who are you? and what's the matter with you?"

"Paddle slow thar, young man!" said the old river-rat to young Hall, then bending his eyes upon Bronson continued: "I are all right, boys, I assure ye; I'm Old Occident, hunter and trapper. I'm not celebrated for my beauty, nor my sweet ways; but I have a tooth for Ingin-fightin' and hair-dressin', and that's what I'm here for now. Strangers, thar's a fight on hand. Thar's a dozen or two Ingins this holy sanctified minute, ambushed in the edge of that brush and partly kivered with sand. I am here to warn ye of this fact. I couldn't get it done in time to prevent your friends from landing, and now to save them, it's best to go on and all stand together. By keeping on the alert, you can bring half of the varlets down afore they can say Jackson Robinson. They seemed to know you were comin' and laid for you."

A look of fear and astonishment passed over every face in the boat, and the question rose in each mind: was there a traitor, as well as assassin, among them? If not, how had the savages gained a knowledge of their coming? Had they anticipated the pursuit of Ada's captors by this party of settlers?

They had no time for speculation over the matter for the prow of the boat soon touched the shore. In a moment every man was out, Old Occident among them. A few words acquainted the others of the situation. The settlers, accustomed to dangers and surprises, acted with remarkable coolness. No one could have detected by their actions that they were momentarily expecting a bloody conflict.

There was a strip of sand lying along the river some four rods wide. On the further side it was fringed with low, scrubby willows. Beyond this lay a great, green prairie.

As if actuated by intuition, the party fell into a

line and started across the beach. It was the signal for action. There was heard the clear, sharp whistle of a bird, and then from the sand and the bushes in front of them, rose a score of savages with a yell that would have stricken terror to the hearts of the whites had they not been expecting it. But, scarcely had the war-whoop died upon their lips, ere a single rifle back in the woods rung out, and a savage fell. Who it was that had fired this friendly shot the settlers had no time to inquire, but raising their rifles poured a deadly volley into the ranks of the foe.

The Indians were the surprised party. Half of their number fell like grass before the sickle. The others recoiled.

Old Occident placed his fingers to his lips and gave utterance to a sharp whistle that startled his friends. Then he shouted:

"Charge, men! give the varlets the butt of yer guns! Yoop! hurrah, for the tigers of the raging Cheyenne!"

His shout of victory rallied the fee who, turning, again advanced to meet the whites, but they were in an open field where an Indian cannot fight if upon foot. However, they were loth to have their well-laid plans thwarted and they pressed forward and met the whites in a hand-to-hand encounter. But few blows, however, had been struck when the settlers were reinforced by a dog and a mule that seemed imbued with the spirit of savage ferocity. They dashed into the thickest of the fray, the dog snapping and tearing at the red-skins' legs, while the mule plied her heels with terrific violence, regardless of friend or foe.

The result of this sudden appearance of new foes was the complete rout of the red-skins. They fled in wild affright over the plain, while the settlers retreated backward toward the river to get out of the reach of the mule's heels, for the animal now held the field, and stood laying and kicking at imaginary foes as though life depended upon the most frantic efforts.

The settlers were not only surprised, but amused by the animal's actions; but Old Occident threw himself upon the ground and rolled and laughed until it seemed his sides would burst.

"You old fool," exclaimed Arnold Bush, excited, astonished and provoked, "what ails you, anyhow?"

"What ails me?" asked the fellow, rising to a sitting posture, and looking up with a comical face; "why, man, isn't that enough to make the river smile? or make a wooden man laugh? Did you ever perceive such a prime display of dog wit and jackass grit as them two critters has made? Say, tell me, will ye?"

"Are they your animals?"

"They are, for a posel rartinty," replied Occident, "and it's that mule, Dicky, and that dog, Lurr, that enjoys a sold high light. They've been brought up on it, and I tell you what thar's more'n one Ingin that'll carry the print of Dicky's heels and Burr's teeth to the happy hunting grounds. And when the judgment day comes no need of them reds comin' up for a final hearin'—their scars'll brand them, and old Satan'll git 'em."

"You've not been in this country long, have you, Occident?" asked Arnold Bush.

"Not long—no, sir," was the laconic answer.

"It's the first time I ever heard of Old Occident."

"Well, it's not the last time, I assure you, if you count Daisy and Burr in with me."

"Confound that mule!" exclaimed Bush, "she respects neither friend nor foe with her jagged lightning."

"Mistake, stranger, mistake," replied the old man; "that thar nigger knows you're beltin' at. Why, sir, I've a gun out here in the woods that says she can kick a fly off your cheek and you not know it—more'n feel a little wind."

"I've no desire to try it," Bush demurred.

"Or you can lay a rock in her hoof," continued Occident, "and she'll sling it to Guinea. That's just the kind of a daisy that mules is. But say, folks, did not we prove the superiority of this little game?"

"Occident," said Ishmael Bronson, "but for you we would have been massacred, and the debt of gratitude we owe you I feel all the more since we were in pursuit of my daughter who is in the power of the red-skins."

"Ah, me!" sighed the old man, "your daughter! Well, I'm sorry to say that I've seen n'thin' of her; but I can almost imagine how you must feel, for I, too, have a daughter—sweet as the Lord ever put breath into. What's more, she's alone at our forced home, and if I should go back and find her gone—well, words are useless. Which way now do you go?"

"Ada's captors have doubtless crossed the prairie, for their village lies north among the hills."

"And so does my cabin," admitted Old Occident; "God in heaven! if I try harm a hair of my girl's head, I'll drench the land with red-skin blood!"

"Friends," said Thomas White, "did any of you note a shot being fired behind us when the savages rushed from their concealment?"

"Yes," answered half a dozen.

"Some friend over the river," declared Occident, "that wants to keep in the shade. Mebbe it's that wild man I saw yesterday in the Beaver Marsh."

"A wild man?" exclaimed Arnold Bush.

"Yes, wild or crazy. I only got a glimpse of the critter afore he vanished among the reeds of the swamp where no sane man could follow. He was almost nude—wore nothin' in the world but a sort of a wolf-skin about his loins. He was barefooted and bareheaded. His beard was long and unkempt and so was his hair. He was a large man and in lookin' at his tracks I saw that one of his great toes was missin'—I believe it was the left foot."

"By Judas!" exclaimed Arnold Bush, "Jack Merley has a toe missing from the left foot; and Jack,

himself, has been missing some time. Can it be that Jack has gone crazy and wandered off?"

"Shouldn't wonder a bit," averred Old Occident, "but the poor devil ought to be looked after. He was armed with a short rifle or carbine, and when he saw me he shot into the swamp shouting: 'Vengeance is mine! Vengeance is mine!'"

Every man started as the old man pronounced these words, and the look that he gave his comrades told his agitation of mind.

Arnold Bush seemed actually frightened, and for the next ten minutes plied the old hunter with questions concerning the wild man of the swamp.

In the meantime, Rupert Hall was looking for the trail of Ada's abductors, and finding evidence sufficient to warrant the belief that the Indians had gone north, the party, accompanied by Occident, set out over the prairie regardless of the trail. They knew the point the abductors were aiming for, and this was enough.

A hot sun shone from a cloudless sky. The plain glistened with heat. Not a breath of air was stirring. The grass and flowers drooped under the burning rays of the sun. But the settlers pushed on, despite the heat, with eager, hopeful hearts.

Old Occident proved an agreeable companion. He was whimsically eccentric, and his talk and stories of adventure did much toward making the journey less laborious and monotonous.

About the middle of the afternoon, when in the depths of the prairie, Burr stopped suddenly and crouched in the grass.

"Harp of David!" exclaimed Old Occident, "he yints a red-skin, boys; fall in men, and—"

At this juncture an unearthly scream came from the rear and looking back all saw Daisy, who had been left to follow at will, struggling with a savage. The mule had on a bridle and a blanket-saddle, and the redskin had succeeded in catching her and mounting; but this was as far as he was permitted to go. Daisy was struggling frantically to dislodge him from her back. Burr, the dog, gave a fierce yelp and darted back to the assistance of his friend. He was soon seen to leap from the tall grass and seize the red-skin by the shoulder, and by the time Old Occident and Rupert Hall had reached the scene of action, the Indian was in his last agonies.

The trouble of the party, however, did not end here. A score or two of mounted Indians were seen moving along the horizon north of them, and it did not require a second glance to convince them that the red-skins were coming toward them.

"Harp of the good King David!" exclaimed Old Occident, "that means war, and the odds are against us, boys. But if nothing but a fight'll let us out of a devil of a predicament, I think this party's composed of metal as what they used to make Spartans of. I might shile out on Daisy, but be it known, boys, that I'm not that kind of a shanghi. I'll stick right here and do my sheer ov dishin' out brimstone to the foe."

"We'll not stand the shadow of a chance in this open prairie," declared Arnold Bush.

"I think," admitted young Hall, "our chances are good to lose our hair."

"Don't cry afore you're hurt, boys," encouraged Occident.

"What's that?" asked Bronson, pointing to an object east of them.

"It looks like a mound," answered one of the men.

"By gracious!" exclaimed Bronson, looking around him, "I thought this prairie wore an air of familiarity about it. Boys, that's the very place I were telling you of yesterday—Fort Rane!"

"Where we were besieged last fall," added one of the settlers.

"That can afford us no shelter now, for if built of sod it has crumbled away under the rains and winds of nearly a year," said Arnold Bush.

"Maybe not," replied Occident, and he led the way toward the little fort.

They soon reached it and to the happy surprise of all, it was found in a perfect state of preservation. Grasses had grown out of the walls, and upon the top a wild rose-bush grew and bloomed. Around the fort where the plow had turned up the turf, the earth was brown and bare.

Ishmael Bronson was the first to enter the little enclosure, where, but a few months previous, he and his friends, assisted by the lamented Tom Rane, had held Con Robber and his followers in check for three days and nights. A shout burst from his lips as he entered, and it was repeated by his friends.

A few weeds and blades of grass grew inside. The little stream murmured along as of yore in its deep, narrow channel through the inclosure.

"Yoop-ee!" shouted Old Occident, "blest if this isn't a royal place for war. I tell ye we can take these skylarks now in a riptangular style, and jog 'em over Jordan. Come in here, Daisy, and back up there with yer jagged lightning; and Burr, you hunt a corner, ole dog. Governor, did you say you had a tilt here once before with the red-skins?"

"With the red-skins and outlaws," replied Bronson, "a few days prior to the extermination of Con Robber's band by the military; but, boys, what's this—a human skeleton, by heavens!"

In the center of the fort he found the bleached bones of a skeleton that lay with extended limbs, the extremities of which were tied to iron pins driven in the ground. The cords had almost rotted from the bones, but there were enough left to tell the terrible tale: *some one had died there, lashed to the earth!*

"Some poor devil has met a terrible death there," decided Rupert Hall.

"Yes," replied Bronson, "and here are some strands of his garments and—goodness! here is a book—a diary!"

He picked it up and found that it was in a tolera-

ble state of preservation. He turned through the leaves and found the last date in it was in October of the previous year, and the last entry thus: "I start for fort D—to-day—commandant sent for me—a threatened Indian outbreak, I presume, at the bottom of it." Then he turned back to the beginning of the entries and there at the top saw the name—*Thomas Rane*.

"There, there!" cried the old man, "that settles the fate of poor Tom Rane—brave, noble, daring Tom Rane. Some fiends have captured him, bound him there and murdered him, or left him there to die and rot under the open sky. Of this there is not a single doubt in my mind."

Further search was made and everything found went to substantiate the old man's conclusion—that the fate of Tom Rane was no longer a mystery.

With sad and solemn hearts the settlers removed the bones of the dead man aside for burial. Ishmael Bronson was very sad and bowed down with grief, for he knew that his poor child had been waiting and watching for him who would never come, for long, weary months.

"Now they're comin' a-hoopin'," suddenly cried Old Occident, and every eye was turned from the skeleton to the approaching savages.

The red-skins had scattered out to the right and left and began to encircle the fort, brandishing their tomahawks and lances like yelling fiends. They kept beyond rifle range of the fort and finally began galloping in a circle around it, lying upon the opposite side of their ponies, and performing other feats of horsemanship equal to the wild Comanche.

"All that danged poppycock's not goin' to do them much good," said Old Occident, "for they'll find out, afore they're thro' with it, that they're foolin' around a hornet's nest. That nice horsemanship's to git us off our guard while they edge in on us, and d'rectly they'll jist come rollin' in on us hillbent. Better come in, young man; a stray bullet might upset you."

The last words were directed to Arnold Bush, who was pacing to and fro outside, in a thoughtful mood—as if totally unconscious of the presence of danger. Before he could reply to the old hunter's words of caution, there rose on the air a horrid yell and the thunderous rush of hooved feet. The savages, lying flat upon their animals' backs were charging upon the fort from every direction.

"By the harp of good King David! my Spartan heroes, the hour has come to try our mettle!" yelled Old Occident; "for God's sake don't waste a shot, men! Steady your nerves, take aim and fire when sure of your man!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE NEW BATTLE OF FORT RANE.

FOURTEEN rifles lying upon the top of the little sod fort bristled in the summer sun, and fourteen steady eyes blazed along the deadly barrels. Every man had selected his mark, with the self-assurance that it was covered by no other rifle, and drew a bead upon the same.

Arnold Bush was the first to fire. He missed—he appeared to be excited.

Then, almost as one, the other thirteen rifles rung out, and a moment later as many horses ran riderless over the plain.

A yell, still wilder than ever, burst from the red-skins' lips and rising to a sitting posture they urged on their animals, hoping to reach the fort and destroy its defenders ere they could reload. But the defenders did not rely altogether upon their rifles. Each man was armed with a pair of revolvers, and with these they now awaited the onset.

With tomahawks in hand and lances poised, the savages advanced in a circle that now became an almost solid line. When within three rods of the fort the settlers opened a deadly fire with their heavy Colts. It was, in a measure, unexpected by the foe; still they pressed on, some firing their guns, some throwing their tomahawks and others their lances. But the confusion created by the rearing and plunging of riderless horses, the attempt to help the wounded, and the incessant fire of the whites, threw them into a perfect panic. Yells, groans, shouts and the rattling volleys of pistol shots added to the confusion, and in less than five minutes from the time the first shot was fired, the battle, for the time being, had ended and the settlers had gained a bloodless victory, with the exception of a few slight wounds.

The red-skins withdrew over a quarter of a mile from the scene of their inglorious defeat. The leaders then gathered in council, and in a few minutes they all separated and scattered their forces over the plain again. But they seemed in no way anxious to repeat their late experience with the settlers.

"They're going to wait for night," remarked Rupert Hall, glancing at the sun which was still some two hours high.

"Hullo, here! reinforcements!" suddenly burst from Bronson's lips, and turning, every man saw the form of a stranger rise up from the bed of the little stream flowing under and through the fort.

It was Scar-Face Saul, the Silent Hunter.

"By the harp of dancin' David!" exclaimed Old Occident, "it's Scar-Face Saul-a-mon, as true as I'm the son of my mother. Howdy, Saul!"

The two shook hands, then the old hunter introduced the new-comer to his friends; but most of the latter had met him before at Prairie Hill and elsewhere.

"You've come in a good time, Saul," said Ishmael Bronson.

"Yes; you seem to be in trouble," he replied, as he adjusted his green glasses and scanned the prairie around them.

"We've got a bloody case on hand, or have made it so for the red-skins, Saul," replied Occident.

"I see you have. I heard firing and crept down here in the channel or the creek. You've quite a fort here, friends—well arranged, I should say, for temporary defense."

"This is Fort Rane," responded Mr. Bronson, "so named from the fact that Tom Rane, the ranger, superintended its construction when danger menaced us. And speaking of Rane reminds me that the mystery of his disappearance has been solved at last. But how he died, or by whose hands is still a mystery."

"Ah, indeed?" returned Saul in surprise, and Ishmael Bronson saw his eyes flash behind his glasses like a gleam of lightning behind a storm-cloud.

"Yes, we found his remains here in this fort, pinned to the earth where he has doubtless died a thousand deaths—the victim of savage cruelty. But the facts in the case will ever remain a secret."

"Too bad!" sighed the white-haired hunter, "for I have heard that Tom Rane was a noble fellow, and—"

"What does that savage mean?" interrupted Rupert Hall pointing to a red-skin that was galloping from group to group of the surrounding enemies. "Inciting his warriors," replied Scar-Face Saul, "and you may expect another attack soon. Why don't some of you pick that fellow off?"

"Why, that's a quarter of a mile, or more," answered Bronson; "I saw Tom Rane shoot a savage further than that from this very spot, but then there's no Tom Rane in this crowd, or any other."

"Is there a long-ranged rifle in the crowd?" asked Saul.

All eyes at once turned toward Arnold Bush who answered:

"I have a Sharp's rifle."

"May I try it on yonder red-skin?"

"Yes," replied Bush with a slight hesitancy, "but remember we have no bullets to waste."

Saul took the rifle, "lefted" it, glanced through the sights, and then looked it carefully over. He was surprised, somewhat, when he found a small bullet buried in the breech, and the woodwork otherwise marred by knife and rough usage.

"I believe I have seen this gun before," the hunter observed.

Bush started and replied:

"I purchased it of a Sioux Indian."

"No doubt of it," responded Saul, and laying the rifle on the top of the fort, he took aim at a group of red-skins and fired. In a few moments a yell came back. The bullet had gone home.

A shout burst from the lips of the settlers.

Saul having reloaded the gun, said:

"I will now try that chief yonder."

"Is it to our best interest to incite the warriors to a deadly vengeance by killing their leaders?" questioned Arnold Bush in a doubtful tone.

No one replied; but Saul pressed the trigger, the hammer fell, there was a sharp report, and, true to the aim the bullet went home and the savage fell.

"Harp of the good King David! that's the best shot I ever see'd made!" exclaimed Old Occident in tones of admiration.

"I saw Tom Rane do equally as well," replied Ishmael Bronson.

"It is as I predicted, you see," observed Arnold Bush; "the fall of their leader is inciting the warriors to a speedy attack. See! they are coming! Saul, I will take my rifle."

At this juncture a cry burst from the lips of one of the men.

A savage had suddenly appeared in their midst from the channel of the little creek. He held his hands up—palms forward in token of peace and friendship.

It was Topeka, the friendly Pawnee, whom we met once before at Heinrich Strahl's agency. His presence was hailed with joy by the besieged, and when he saw he was recognized, he picked up his rifle and sprung out of the creek.

Meanwhile the enemy were approaching for another assault. It was now sundown, and shadows were gathering. The red-skins were lying flat upon their ponies, and in the dusk of evening, horse and rider were blended into one.

When a hundred yards from the fort the rifles of the defenders rung out. The savages answered with a yell and pressed on. In a moment they were within pistol-shot, and then the death struggle was renewed in the gathering twilight. Up to the very walls of the defense—into the flaming jaws of death, the wild, frenzied warriors rode, throwing tomahawks and lances, but as fast as their weapons fell within reach, Topeka seized them, and with more precision than they had been sent, hurled them back at the envying horde.

Suddenly a young war-chief decked in all the paraphernalia of the war-path, dashed up to the entrance to the fort, paused and raised his lance. Before a hand could stay the deadly weapon it pierced the breast of a settler and he fell dead, but it was the chief's last victim. The eye of Topeka had marked him, and scarcely had the lance left his hand ere a tomahawk, thrown by the friendly, cleft the skull of the chief.

A wild, gurgling cry burst from the lips of the Sioux, and as he tottered and reeled upon his horse, Topeka leaped forward, dragged him to the earth, then sprung upon the back of the riderless horse, and, with the war-whoop of the Pawnee, dashed away over the plain at a wild, breakneck speed.

This created a diversion in favor of the besieged, for nearly every savage turned away in pursuit of the hated and terrible Topeka; and once again were our friends victorious, but this assault had cost them two of their number, and every one some slight wound.

Carl Madden and Rufus Dayton lay dead. The latter was slain by the lance of the young war-chief. The lance was still in his breast. Near Dayton lay Madden, Ishmael Bronson knelt by his side to make sure of his death. It was almost dark, and as the old man bent over the prostrate form, he caught sight of a paper lying upon his breast. He picked it up and searched it carefully. Upon it was written in rude characters these words:

"Vengeance is mine and I will repay."

An exclamation burst from every lip. Arnold Bush muttered an oath and shot his keen eyes quickly around him.

"My God!" he said, half in fear and half in rage, "that cowardly assassin is among us again!"

Again every man traced every face for evidence of guilt, but if it was marked upon any one face, the darkness concealed it from view. A dead silence reigned for several moments.

The subject was permitted to rest and arrangements at once made for departure from the fort. The Indians had, evidently, all withdrawn in the chase of Topeka.

Madden and Dayton were buried inside the little fort. This sad duty occupied all of an hour, and before it had been concluded, the moon rose in a blue, hazy sky casting a weird, ghostly light over the plain.

Finally the little band was ready to start upon their perilous journey across the plain. As they filed out of the little fort the man in the lead suddenly stopped and in a low tone, exclaimed:

"Halt! halt!"

All stopped and listened. They heard the faint murmur of a strange voice before them, and soon the form of a man was unfolded from the shadows. He was coming toward them. They fell back, and in the shadows of the fort awaited his approach. He came on with long, measured strides. He was a tall man, and, strange to say, was almost naked. Only a wolf-skin girded his loins. His hair and beard were long and unkempt.

"Harp of David! it's that Wild Man of the Marsh!" whispered Old Occident, "the very same March here that I see'd cavortin' round the marsh jist yesterday."

"Silence! down in the shadows!" commanded Mr. Bronson.

Crouching close against the sod walls they waited and watched. The man came on, approached the defense, looked in at the gate, then turned and uttered a wild, horrible laugh that caused the blood to run cold in the veins of the listeners. Then he sprang upon the wall of the fort and standing erect appeared to be gazing around him. He seemed unconscious of the presence of any one.

He was plainly outlined against the sky, and his great muscular limbs, his long hair and beard, and his hairy wolf-skin skirt, gave him a wild, picturesque and savage appearance. In his hand he held a short rifle. For a minute he stood silent, then he placed his hand upon his head and began muttering in his beard:

"Vengeance is mine and I will repay—Vengeance! vengeance! vengeance!"

The blood almost chilled in the veins of the listeners as these words fell upon their ears.

"'Tis the assassin," whispered Ishmael Bronson to Arnold Bush, "that avenging Nemesis."

"My God, Bronson, it is my old friend, Jack Marley!—he is crazy!" replied Bush. "I will speak to him."

Bush rose to his feet and advancing across the area said:

"Jack, my old friend, what does this—"

"Vengeance!" burst from the wild man's lips before Bush could finish, and leaping from the wall, he vanished from sight like a shadow before a burst of sunlight.

"Good God! he has vanished!" said Bush in bated breath.

"Ay! but others come!" replied Rupert Hall, and pointed south where shadowy forms could be seen emerging from the gloaming.

"They are the savages coming back!" and Ishmael Bronson's tone was one of hopeless despair.

"Yas, boys, we're in for it again," said Old Occident; "stand to your guns, and may God have mercy upon us!"

CHAPTER VII.

LITTLE POLLY.

ADA BRONSON'S captors hurried her away from the vicinity of Prairie Hill as rapidly as possible. They took no pains to conceal their trail. On the contrary, they left it plain as they could make it as a decoy for those who might be disposed to follow. They traveled on until they reached the Cheyenne river, where they were met by a large party of their friends. A short halt was made, then the river was crossed and the captors continued their journey while their companions ambushed themselves to await the coming of the pursuers. On over the prairie for weary miles the maiden was borne. The sun beat hot upon her, but fear and sorrow had well-nigh done the work for the poor girl, and she was scarcely conscious most of the time. Her captors seemed totally indifferent to her feelings and sufferings.

About the middle of the afternoon they stopped by a bubbling spring in the deep, dense woods. On a rock overhanging the spring some romantic wanderer had carved the words "Echo Spring." It was in a lonely, peculiar and picturesque place—a place that seemed to wear an air of mystery and echo the voice of footsteps with a hollow, ghostly sound.

The Indians placed Ada upon the ground. One of them brought her some water in a cow-horn cup. The cool draught and the overhanging shadows of

the tree under which she sat revived her. She bathed her head and face and ate some dried venison.

The Indians sat down by the spring to talk and smoke. They appeared to be waiting some one.

An hour passed and Ada fell asleep. One of the savages drew the edges of the blanket upon which she lay over her with tender care, then went back to his comrades.

A few minutes later a crashing was heard among the bushes and the Indians started to their feet. Then a huge bear burst from the woods and rushed down past the spring and entered the woods beyond.

It appeared to be fleeing from pursuers, but without stopping to ascertain who the pursuers might be, the three Indians bounded away in pursuit themselves. To them there would be more honor in slaying the bear than taking a white scalp.

Ada was alone, but she was totally unconscious of the fact. She was enjoying a sound and refreshing sleep—the first since her capture. But pleasant as her dreams were, she was suddenly awakened to the horrible reality of something breathing in her face. She opened her eyes and looked up and around her. She saw a black, shaggy beast standing over her with glowing eyes and red, dripping tongue. It seemed of huge, unnatural proportions. Her brain grew dizzy and a mist gathered over her eyes. Unconsciousness blotted out the horrible form from her gaze.

When she again recovered it was with a sense of drowning. She started with a shudder and a cry of horror. She was in the water, true enough. And it was night. Above her she could see the starry sky. She felt herself borne along through the cold waves by some invisible power. She bent her gaze downward. A chill of horror ran through her frame. She saw the folds of the blanket in which she was wrapped in the jaws of a huge animal. She heard the creature's labored breathing, and felt the strokes of its limbs as it beat the waves of the swift-moving river.

The maiden's thoughts were so troubled that she could not fully comprehend her situation. It is true, the water revived her somewhat, but she was so worked upon by a species of horror that all seemed like a terrible nightmare. She felt herself carried through the water and finally dragged upon the beach. She heard her dumb captor shake the water from his hairy coat and begin to pant as if exhausted; yet she knew not what moment its cruel fangs would be buried in her flesh. That it was a bear dragging her to its lair, she had not a doubt.

"Bow—wow—wow!" suddenly burst in thunderous tones upon her ears, and resounded through the woods.

Ada opened her eyes. It was the bark of a dog. A thrill of joy shot through her form when she saw it was a great Newfoundland dog that had rescued her from her savage captors.

She rose to a sitting posture. The dog came up and thrust his nose in her face, fondled around her and otherwise manifested his dumb delight over her revival. Then again he turned aside and sent forth one of those deep-toned barks that fairly boomed through the night.

"Oh, you good doggy!" the maiden said, patting the animal upon the head.

The dog whined, licked her hand, then turned suddenly and pricking up his ears, appeared to be listening. Both he and the maiden heard a splash in the water. The dog uttered a low whine and crouched down before the girl.

Ada looked out upon the river and saw two dark objects swimming toward her. At first she took them for beavers, but as they came nearer she saw they were human heads—the heads of her late savage captors.

A new fear filled the girl's breast and she rose to flee. Just then the red-skins reached the shore, when, like a panther, the dumb friend at her side leaped forward, and seizing one of the foe dragged him to the earth before he could realize what was up. A shake of the great head, a crunch of the terrible jaws and the red-skin was powerless to do injury.

But, meanwhile, the other savage had seized Ada and was dragging her away into the woods, but the great dog soon came crashing through the undergrowth in pursuit. The Indian endeavored to elude the dog but in vain. He was seized by the thigh and thrown violently to the earth. An unearthly scream issued from the warrior's lips. Ada heard the dog crushing and grinding his flesh between his jaws and her heart grew sick. She turned and fled, scarcely aware of what she was doing. She had gone but a few steps, however, when she heard the patter of the dog's feet behind her. She glanced back and saw his green, blazing eyes and shaggy form that filled her with renewed terror. For all the animal had saved her, she feared him; and so she ran on, until, out of breath and exhausted, she fell unconscious. When she recovered she found the faithful dog at her side, and that she was lying in a little glade where the moon shone full upon her.

The dog seeing her move rose upon his haunches and gave a prolonged howl—oh, so lonesome and doleful that Ada shivered.

A few minutes later a movement was heard in the woods—a light footstep sounded near, and then from the shadows a lithe figure suddenly glided.

It was the form of a young girl clad in a strange, picturesque costume made partially of buckskin and ornamented with many colored beads. A jaunty little hat was upon her head, and her feet and ankles were incased in buckskin moccasins and leggings. Like a nymph of the woods she came floating into the moonlight.

The dog uttered a growl, and then a voice, ever so sweet, called out:

"Why, Monk, don't you know me?"

The dog recognizing the voice, bounded to the maiden's side and began fondling around her in a pleased and excited manner.

Meanwhile, the girl had caught sight of the little figure crouching on the earth hard by, and with cautious steps she approached it.

Ada started up as she came near, saying:

"Oh, I know I have met a friend!"

The girl recoiled at sound of Ada's voice, but recovering her composure, she exclaimed:

"Oh, my! who have I met here?"

"My name is Ada Bronson," she explained, and in a few words she told the story of her abduction and adventures.

"Oh, my dear Ada Bronson!" cried the little fairy familiarly, her voice full of the tenderest sympathy, "come with me and you shall find food and clothes in our humble home, such as it is. And Monk saved you? Oh, what a noble dog he is. When I found him missing to-night I had an idea he was on a mission of kindness; and when I heard his barking I knew he was in trouble and so I came to his assistance. But I never dreamed of finding him here with such a pretty little lady as you are."

"What is your name?" Ada asked.

"Polly Occident," replied the vivacious little girl; "we live down the river at Hanging Rock—not far from here, Ada. We've only lived here since last spring, and would never have come then if we'd thought the Indians would ever have broken out again."

"We have had some peace," said Ada, "since Con Robber's band of outlaws was broken up; but then, life upon the frontier is always uncertain, and it's a wonder to me, Pretty Polly, that one so young and lovely as you are has ever escaped the eyes of the outlaws and savages."

"They know better than to come around when Monk or father is at home; besides, I can shoot a gun or revolver as well as anybody, and I would fight like everything, I expect, if the Indians ever come. But come, Ada; you are wet and tired, I know."

Polly took Ada's hand and conducted her some distance through the woods when they came to the door of a little log cabin that stood on the banks of the river under the dark, beetling brow of a great rock.

"This is my home," announced Polly, and they entered the cabin and the light of a tallow dip scon relieved the room of its darkness.

"Now, Ada Bronson," said the fair little hostess, "you must make yourself at home and as comfortable as you can."

"Thank you, Polly, I shall do so," replied Ada gratefully.

The room was small and plainly furnished though everything bore the neatness and taste of Polly's handiwork.

Ada was furnished dry clothing and a good, hearty supper, after which the light was put out, for fear of its attracting canger, and then the maidens sat and conversed for several hours. Finally they retired, leaving the great dog, Monk, to keep ward and watch over them. But nothing occurred to mar the pleasure of their dreams, and with the early dawn they were astir.

Polly prepared breakfast and the two sat down at the table. Monk had been away during the morning, but of this Polly thought nothing strange until suddenly she heard the dog outside making a peculiar noise.

"Oh dear! I do wonder if anything's the matter?" cried Polly, running to the door.

Looking out a cry burst from her lips, for she saw the great Newfoundland dragging a man from the woods toward the cabin door.

The man appeared to be dead; or at any rate, he was motionless and helpless, and with the assistance of the two kind-hearted girls, the dog succeeded in landing his inanimate burden upon the floor of the cabin, then turned and bounded away into the woods again.

Polly and her guest now turned their attention to the stranger. They saw that he was dead, but it was the fumes of liquor that told them that he was only dead-drunk. He was a little old man, not over one hundred and twenty pounds in weight. He had a thin, sharp face covered with a long, thin beard. He was dressed in the garb of a hunter and had in his belt a revolver and knife. He also carried a canteen from which he had no doubt drank the contents that had left him in his drunken condition.

Ada had seen many drunken men in her time and her feelings were rather of disgust than of fear or pity; and so she and Polly dragged the man into the corner behind the door and covered him with a bed-quilt to sleep off his detaches.

"He will sober off after awhile, and then he may give us some trouble," Ada remarked, as she turned away from the man.

"I'll not be troubled much," replied Polly, "for if father or Monk isn't here to collar him, I'll pepper him with that," and the maiden displayed a murderous-looking little Derringer; "so now"—she continued—"let us finish our breakfast."

The two resumed their seats at the table and began their morning meal. They chatted away like magpies while eating, but suddenly a shadow crossed the threshold, a soft footstep fell upon their ears and looking around they saw a savage standing in the doorway.

A cry burst from Ada's lips. She recognized the red-skin as one of her late captors. Nor was he alone. Outside could be seen another Indian.

The savage inside held a tomahawk in his hand. A deadly menace was in his bloodthirsty eye. Polly reached for her revolver lying on a shelf near the red-skin, but the cunning fellow anticipated her

movements, seized the weapon and then raised his hatchet as if to brain her.

"Keep still, or kill—tomahawk brain," threatened the red intruder.

The maidens shrunk back.

"Oh where's Monk? where's Monk?" cried Polly excitedly.

The other savage came in. He was nearly white, though more of a savage than his brother. His eyes rested for a moment on the girls, then turned to the table. The smoking viands seemed to excite his appetite, and he said to his companion in sin:

"Let's eat some, Rainface, at white man's table." The two sat down and with their fingers helped themselves to the food. Meanwhile, Polly and Ada, shrinking into one corner with fear, were watched closely lest they should slip out of the house.

The drunken man behind the door was entirely forgotten by the maidens until suddenly they saw him standing erect, and, peering from behind the open door with one eye.

The girls could scarcely repress a cry of surprise at this discovery; but when they saw the little old man shaking his long, bony finger at them as if imposing silence, they breathed easier. They saw that he was far from being drunk and that his eyes—little gray orbs full of liquid fire—sparkled and glowed with mischief as he peeped from his covert—winked at the girls and made mouths at the savages whose backs were toward him. How matters were likely to culminate the girls could not tell; still their hearts took courage and they waited patiently while the savages gorged themselves upon the savory viands.

Finally, however, the red-skins' hunger was appeased and, rising from their seats, ordered the girls to prepare for departure.

At this juncture, the little man behind the door stepped out and deliberately shot the savage dead. The renegade turned and found himself looking into the muzzle of a pistol.

"Cool!" cried the little man in a voice startling in its firmness, "avaunt! simmer! or by the winged gods of Mount Olympus, I'll prod yer anatomy with a bullet. You know me, ancient sinner, I know ye do, and ye know I'm a condensed magazine full of sickness and cramps and pains, so don't rise a finger or ker-chug she goes, true as my name's Nathaniel Thorne."

"Thorne?—Natty Thorne?" involuntarily burst from Polly's lips.

"Yes, ma'am—Natty, for short," responded the little man, keeping his eyes riveted on the savage; "I used to know Old Occident and come up here on a visit—got awful drunk last night, and I'll swear that dog nosed me out and packed me off to the house like a kitten. But ye see I knowed all 'bout it. I knowed reds war about and didn't want 'em to see me git in here erect, and that's why I let the pup pull me in. Occident not to home I see?"

"No, sir," replied Polly, "he has been gone several days, and I am afraid something has befallen him." "Not if he's got that old mule yit, and that tormented, ugly dog Burr, that he— Hold! blue-blazes and brimstone!"

The last words were caused by the renegade uttering a shrill whistle that was immediately answered by a cry from without. The red-skin made a leap for the door, but a bullet went crashing through his brain and he fell dead, half his length lying across the threshold.

The girls breathed easier. Natty Thorne laughed. "He fooled with the p'int of the wrong thorn, that time," he said.

A yell, loud and terrible, suddenly burst on the air. Thorne started back with a grimace of pain upon his face. The maidens uttered a scream.

A dozen red-skins appeared at the door. At the same instant there was a dull, jarring "thump, thump," upon the roof of the cabin.

The red-skins crowded into the room. Among them was a white man with his face painted and daubed beyond recognition.

"Defile not a thing, or the vengeance of God'll fall upon you!" cried Natty Thorne.

The savages laughed in mockery.

Ada and Polly caught sight of a pair of moccasined feet at the top of the ladder leading into the loft.

Some one was entering from the roof, which had doubtless been gained from the ledge above.

Soon a white man came down the ladder and was followed by an Indian. Ada Bronson's eyes met those of the white man and then she fainted, for they were eyes that burned into her very soul.

Natty Thorne, with a revolver in each hand, opened fire upon the foe. The two that came down the ladder joined him in the fray. A dark body bounded into the room at the first shot. It was the dog, Monk!

A sanguinary fight ensued. The savages drew their tomahawks, but, the loft floor being low, they could not use them to advantage; while the pistols of the whites were deadly weapons. Nor was the dog, Monk, less destructive to savage life or limb.

In a few moments the fight had ended, and Natty Thorne and the two strangers, though bruised and bleeding, were masters of the situation.

When Ada recovered consciousness she found Polly seated at her side. Hard by stood Natty Thorne and his two friends, one of whom was Topeka, the friendly Pawnee, and the other Scar-Face Saul, the hunter. Every one of them, she saw, bore marks of the recent conflict. Scar-Face Saul stood leaning against the wall regarding the maidens in silence. His white hair was dabbled with blood from a wound on the head.

Ada glanced around her. Where were those eyes, she asked herself, that she had seen upon the ladder? They were nowhere to be seen.

"Gals, we had a tropical time of it," Natty remarked, as he fixed a cartridge in his revolver.

"Oh, my God!" cried Polly, "what a dreadful, horrible fight! I was sure we would all be slain. There was so many of them; but do you think we are safe, Natty?"

"For awhile, Polly."

"Oh, I do wonder why father doesn't come?"

"He'll be along by-and-by," Scar-Face Saul assured.

"Then you have seen him?" asked Polly.

"Yes; and Mr. Bronson, also."

A cry of joy burst from the girls' lips.

"Mr. Bronson," continued Saul, "and a party of friends were in pursuit of Miss Ada's captors when Occident, Topeka and I fell in with them. We were finally surrounded by Indians in a little sod barricade that Mr. Bronson called Fort Rane. There we fought the foe several hard battles—repelling them every time. But we saw there was no chance for us to fight our way out, and so we concluded to steal out one by one—every man taking his own chances for life. We arranged to meet near Occident's cabin, and Topeka and I are the only two that have yet reported."

"Then father will come soon."

"I feel in hopes that he, Occident and the rest of the boys will all be along soon."

The maidens clapped their hands with joy.

"But we must not tarry here; the woods are full of enemies," continued Scar-Face Saul.

"Full as a bee-gum," added Natty Thorne; "I think we'd better run the gals off and conceal 'em and then come back and loaf around until the rest of the boys sail into port."

"There's a delightful hiding-place on the river below here," spoke Polly; "papa has always told me to flee there in case of danger when I was alone, and he would come there if I did not meet him at the cabin."

"Then we'll go right there," decided Saul.

Polly procured a basket and filled it with provisions and such things as they would likely need, then led the way down to the river where a canoe was moored.

Saul and the maidens entered the boat and dropped down the river. By direction of Miss Polly the young hunter finally paddled the boat under a great rock overhanging the water so low that the occupants were compelled to stoop forward. When once under this great covering they found a spacious room sloping gradually upward from the water's edge with a smooth stone floor.

Saul sprung out and assisted the maidens to land. "This is a capital hiding-place," he said; "you cannot be seen from the opposite shore. I hope you will pass the time pleasantly until we return for you."

"Thank you, Saul," said Ada gratefully.

"You're welcome to all I have done for you," he replied, fixing an earnest gaze upon Ada. "I only wish I could do more; but I hope you'll not grow uneasy if we do not return soon. It will not be well to be seen coming here should savage eyes be upon us. If Mr. Bronson and Old Occident return soon, and we cannot come to you, I will inform you of the fact by firing two shots in succession at the landing."

"Oh, thank you! you are very kind, Mr. Saul!" exclaimed Polly.

The hunter stepped into the boat, took up the paddle and drove the craft out into the river.

"Scar-Face Saul is a singular fellow, isn't he, Polly?" observed Ada, as the strokes of his paddle died away in the distance.

"Yes, and he's as brave as old Monk," replied Polly in her girlish enthusiasm; "but don't them awful, big scars on his face, and that long white hair, and them big, poppy-eyed goggles make him look funny as a goat? But, oh dear me, Ada! you'd ought to have seen him when they were fighting in the cabin. He looked like a madman. He'd taken his glasses off and I thought his eyes killed as many Indians as his revolver. Why, I never saw such eyes."

"I saw them, Polly, and they scared me almost to death."

"Oh, wasn't I scared though, when that old Indian came into the house? Goodness! I never knew that I had such a thing as a Derringer. And then the way Old Natty Thorne turned out was as cute as could be. I've heard father talk so often about Natty Thorne, and say he'd like to see him. I expect they'll have a regular jubilee when they meet."

And thus the two maidens conversed as the hours wore away. The sun crossed the meridian and sunk slowly toward the west.

Patiently and anxiously the maidens awaited Saul's signal telling them their fathers had come; but, not a sound disturbed the stillness of the hour save the gentle rippling of the eddying waters.

Suddenly a cry burst from Ada's lips and she pointed downward before her at the water's edge.

Polly looked in the direction indicated and was horror-struck by the sight that met her gaze. The eddy sweeping in under the rock had carried a forked log into view, and to this log, with the head hanging backward in the water, was lashed a human form—the form of a young man—a mere boy!

"Oh, Polly! it is Rupert Hall!" cried Ada. "Poor Rupert is dead!"

"Maybe not," replied the thoughtful Polly, and stooping, the brave little girl reached out and drew the log against the rock upon which she stood.

The body of the boy moved with a convulsive quiver. Life was not extinct.

For the next hour the maidens worked as they never worked before. Their little fingers were blistered with the cruel knots that held the young settler so firm upon the log. But at length the last one was unfastened, and then with their united strength

they dragged the helpless youth to a dry place upon the floor of their retreat.

"Poor Rupert!" said Ada, sadly; "see, he is wounded in the head and arm—yes, and his clothing has been torn with bullets and ruthless hands. Oh, the cruel, cruel Indians."

"Ada, Indians never did this," said Polly, "or they would have scalped him."

"Who else could be so heartless as to try to kill Rupert in this way? Surely, he has no enemies other than Indians."

With a calmness worthy of older heads, the maidens went to work to revive the faint spark of life left in the youth's body. They labored so long and assiduously that the shadows of evening began to gather before they were aware of the hours they had passed. In fact, they never gave a thought to anything else but their labor of love and kindness until startled by a noise in the water.

Looking around, Polly saw a dark object swimming toward them. It was a dog—it was Monk.

"Oh, you dear old dog! you have come to me," the maiden cried, joyfully; "how did you ever find out where I was, Monk?"

Slowly Rupert Hall began to revive, although his breathing was labored and irregular. At times the maidens could hear his respirations, then again it seemed as though the vital spark had fled. His eyes were closed, his lips bloodless, his face pale as death.

"I am afraid there is no hope for Rupert," Ada finally said.

"There must be, Ada, there must be! Oh, dear, dear, if I could only get to the cabin and get some brandy, and bandages, and one of the men, I know Rupert could be saved. Oh, will our friends never come? must he die for want of help? Monk, can't you do something for that poor boy? Here it is, almost dark, Ada, and no signal gun yet. Good Lord, help us!"

"Hark, Polly!" exclaimed Ada.

They listened.

The dip of a paddle came to their ears, and little waves chafed the rock at their feet.

It was now dark and the girls could see nothing; but suddenly the rays of a light shot in under the overhanging ledge.

The girls scarcely breathed in their suspense between hope and fear. But finally Ada said:

"It may be friends; hadn't we better call to them?"

"No, no! goodness, no, child; it may be Indians!"

Monk started up with a growl and before Polly could prevent it, he uttered a loud bark that rolled along the river and boomed through the night.

"Oh heavens, Monk! what have you done?"

"There they are, now!" the girls heard a voice exclaim.

The next moment a canoe appeared in sight under the ledge with two occupants, one of whom carried a torch.

At a glance Ada recognized them as two of the settlers, or rather as Bush's cattlemen, Justin Roach and Paul Devore.

"Oh, they are friends!" cried Ada.

In a few moments the two men landed.

"Girls, Scar-Face Saul sent us after you," announced Devore.

"Oh, we can't leave him," said Polly, pointing to the motionless form of Rupert Hall.

The two men exchanged glances, then advanced and looked down into the face of the boy. They spoke a few words in an undertone then went back to the girls and remarked:

"Poor Rupert Hall! he's dead."

"Dead!" cried Polly, and the word seemed wrong from her very heart; "you do not tell me he is dead?"

"Yes, and we mustn't tarry here—Indians are gettin' thick," said Devore in a manner that seemed heartless to the maidens.

"Oh, sir! I can't leave him until I am sure he is dead," Polly said, half choked with her emotions.

"You will, though," and Devore deliberately took her by the arm and forced her into the canoe, and five minutes later the four were in the boat, and out in the open river paddling down-stream.

Monk swam ashore and disappeared in the woods.

Polly sobbed as if her heart would break. Ada endeavored to comfort her, but her efforts of kindness were in vain.

"Where are our friends?" the weeping girl asked, finally.

"Down the river a ways," responded one of the men, "and—"

"Pull into the shadows, Justin!" suddenly exclaimed Devore as he caught sight of a canoe coming up the moonlit river.

Quick as possible Roach pulled in against the right bank where the shadows of the overhanging foliage afforded them a good shelter, but where they came near capsizing their boat among some driftwood and from which they had no little difficulty in extricating themselves.

The stranger passed by and then the men put out into the river again; but when they had reached the moonlit waters, an exclamation, not unmixed with fear and surprise, escaped their lips, for Polly Occident was gone—missing from the canoe!

CHAPTER VIII.

FREAKS OF A MADMAN.

DEVORE and Roach were not only surprised but infuriated by Polly's absence. They cursed and swore like fiends.

Ada became frightened. She was afraid her young friend had fallen into the river and had been drowned when the canoe came so near upsetting among the driftwood; and yet this seemed impossible without their knowing it. Polly would have cried out.

Polly, however, had not been drowned. Brave,

fearless and daring girl that she was, she had determined upon a desperate expedient. She took a dislike to Roach and Devore. She could not put implicit faith in their honesty. She did not believe Rupert Hall was dead when they left, and so resolved to go back to him at all hazards. And when the boat ran in among the driftwood she stepped from it upon a log, and supporting herself by the low-hanging branches, she felt her way carefully along the log until she reached the shore.

By this time the canoe was out in the river again. Polly being acquainted with every foot of the ground between there and the cabin, started back up the river fast as her feet would carry her. Half an hour's travel brought her to the door of her humble home. She paused and listened. All was silent within. She entered and groped her way about the room, securing a candle and matches, a bandage and some whisky. Then she stole out by the back way and hurried down to the river. There was still another of her father's canoes moored at the landing. She entered it and dropped down the stream, soon arriving at the Hanging Rock.

Landing, she lit her candle, and with an awful fear and suspense pressing upon her heart, approached the place where she had last seen Rupert Hall.

Suddenly she stopped. A cry burst from her lips—a cry of joy; for she saw that Rupert was not only alive, but sitting up and leaning against the rocky wall. The lad turned his head in a feeble manner as the light crossed his vision.

"Oh, thank Heaven, you are better, Rupert!" exclaimed the maiden.

Rupert glanced around him in bewilderment. "Pardon me," he replied in a feeble tone, "I am confused and badly wounded; I know not where I am—whether on earth or not."

Polly smiled, and then as the tears gathered in her eyes she told him all she knew about his troubles. "I have some cruel, heartless enemies," he said; "but to you, my fair young friend, I owe a lifetime of gratitude; and if we ever get out of this I will try and repay you some way."

"God only knows," replied Polly, "whether we will ever get out of our troubles or not. The Indians are all around us."

"Yes, I know the Indians are on the war-path. It was savage cruelty and white man's inhumanity that sent me adrift—dead as they supposed—upon the river."

Thus the two conversed for some time. Polly regarded the handsome face of the unfortunate boy with admiration, and listened to his words that fell like music upon her impulsive young heart. But, suddenly, her rapturous joy was broken. The loud splash of oars was heard, and then a great, cumbersome bateau with a single occupant swung in under the rock, and came to a stand before the young people.

A cry burst from Polly's lips.

Rupert Hall was startled by the vision that met his eyes. It was the vision of a madman—the Wild Man of the Swamp; and as he stood gazing at Rupert and Polly with glaring eyes, his half-nude form, great, muscular limbs, bearded face and long scraggy locks, as seen in the dim glow of the light, gave to him the wild, weird appearance of the grim Charon of the darksome Styx.

"Young man—Rupert Hall," the fellow finally exclaimed, in a hoarse, rasping tone, "who murdered you—who murdered you?"

The manner in which he spoke sent a shiver through Rupert's frame.

"I am not dead, Jack," the boy replied, for, in the Wild Man he recognized the face of Jack Marley. "I am wounded—only hurt, Jack. This girl saved me. Isn't she brave, Jack? She rescued me from the river into which my enemies threw me."

"Vengeance is mine and I will repay," said the Wild Man, in a low, solemn tone, and drawing his knife he leaped ashore, as the young people thought, to murder them; but, to their joyful surprise he advanced and with the point of his knife scratched the words he had uttered on the smooth face of the rock.

Then turning he walked to Rupert and bent over him.

A scream burst from Polly's lips and springing forward she grasped the madman's arm, crying out: "Do not kill him! do not kill Rupert!"

The man laughed hoarsely, sheathed his knife and lifting the form of Rupert in his arms laid him tenderly in the bateau. Determined that the man should not harm the gallant boy, Polly entered the boat, also.

The Wild Man seemed as greatly pleased as a child, acted very much like a child. He seated himself, grasped the oars and sent the bateau out into the river; and then Rupert and Polly realized that they were adrift with the Wild Man of the Swamp.

Rupert was compelled to lie down. Polly sat by his side and conversed with him in a low tone.

The boatman turned up stream and exerted his brawny muscle to its utmost. He passed the cabin of Old Occident and labored on against the heavy current.

He had gone but a short distance when a canoe containing three persons hailed him.

Before the wild boatman could respond, a glad cry of joy burst from Polly's lips, for she recognized those in the canoe as Justin Roach, Paul Devore and pretty Ada Bronson.

Running their canoe alongside the bateau, Roach sprung upon the craft, exclaiming in tones of anger:

"Here's that little wench now, and—"

These were the last words he ever uttered, for the madman sprung to his feet and tearing an oar

from its lock dealt the settler a blow on the head that felled him lifeless.

With an oath Devore drew his revolver and fired upon the murderer, but missed his mark.

"Vengeance! vengeance!" shrieked the madman, the slumbering fires of his maddened brain bursting forth with demoniac fury; then turning he leaped overboard into the dark waters and was seen no more.

Hurriedly taking in the situation, and that, too, with no little presence of mind, Devore assisted Ada aboard the bateau; then replacing the oar that had been used as a weapon by the madman, he seated himself and sent the craft gliding slowly up the river.

CHAPTER IX.

NATTY THORNE MEETS HIS FRIEND.

After leaving Polly and Ada under Hanging Rock, Scar-Face Saul and Natty Thorne hurried back to the cabin. They found the door closed, and not knowing whether the building contained foes or friends, they did not enter, but moved away to the cover of the woods; and there, under the deep shadows they waited and watched all through the day until in the night.

"They are most all-fired angelic gals, Scar-Face," Natty Thorne observed when the conversation turned upon the maidens.

"They are lovely girls—too fair and innocent for such a heathen country," replied Saul, earnestly.

"Oh, that Polly's been bro't up 'mongst Ingins, b'ars and mountains, and she's a reglar little heroine; but, blame me, if I didn't think you'd scart that other little dewdrap to death, this mornin'." She fainted dead away, and keeled over purty as you please.

"Are you sure it was sight of me, or was it fear that caused Ada to swoon away?" asked Saul.

"Couldn't swear which, but I have my views of the case and they are that she got scart at you."

"She has seen me before," said Saul.

"Indeed? well you've got a sort of a skeery look, Saul, and a spoilt mug; but them goggles tames you down some—makes you look like another critter."

I know it, Thorne; but my eyes were so affected by my misfortune that they cannot stand the dazzling rays and changes of light; and I—There! wasn't that a signal of one of our men?"

They listened, but the sound was not repeated. A sharp firing, however, was suddenly heard far up the river.

"The boys must be up thar in a fight," said Natty; "and bless my han'some figeronomy if I ain't goin' up thar to have a hand in it. Will you go, Scar-Face? or wait here?"

"I'll remain here and watch who goes to or from the cabin."

Natty glided rapidly away. Guided by the occasional report of a rifle, he moved along with the silence of a shadow. Before he had gone far, however, the firing ceased; still he kept on until a mile or two from the cabin, when he stopped to listen. He started when he heard some one whistling softly as if calling a dog.

"By gallinippers!" he chuckled to himself, "if that isn't Old Occident's thrush-like whistle I never heard it! Now, sir, I, Nathan Thorne, proposes to git the joke on him."

Dropping on all fours the old hunter trotted along in the direction from whence the call was coming.

It was blinding dark in the woods, but men accustomed to the dangers and darkness of the woods after night, use their sense of hearing with almost faultless accuracy.

Straight toward the man standing in the shadows of a great tree, Natty trotted along and was soon at the man's side fondling around his knees.

"Ah, Burr, ole pup," Occident—for he it was—said, stooping and patting Natty's head, which was covered with a 'coon-skin cap, "the dashed varlets hav'n't got you yet. Hist, pup!"

The last words were occasioned by the sound of pattering feet upon the dry leaves, and scarcely a moment had passed when another "dog" came trotting from the woods, and leaping up, thrust its muzzle in his face and whined around him with dumb delight.

"Harp of David!" exclaimed the old man, "what's this mean? two dogs here, by blazes! Burr, what—"

Here the old borderman's words were cut short by a growl of his dog and the stealthy approach of footsteps; but, before he had time for a second thought, the dog sprung upon the skulker, and a savage yell told that a cunning Sioux was near. At the same instant Old Occident felt a hand thrust from the shadows of night into his face.

"Great vipers!" burst from the old man's lips, for the cold touch sent a clammy chill over him.

"Occident?" a voice said, and the hunter, as if in doubt, hesitated, listened and then said:

"Jist say that ag'in, will ye, stranger?"

"Occident?" repeated the voice a little louder.

"Jerusalem! Harp of David! it's Natty Thorne! Why, Nat, you imp of darkness! Here, shake, ye infernalated little jassack!"

"Yoop-ee! Glory!—shake that varmint, Burr—ah, Natty, I see now you're the fust dog that come to me, you dasted whelp you. Into him, Burr, ole pup. It's a wonder you didn't git yer jugular squeezed foolin' 'round a box-constrictor."

"I know you, Occident," replied Natty; "but come, we've no time to talk now. Reds are comin'. Call off your dog and let's flicker."

Together the two old friends hurried away, followed by the dog, Burr.

Out in the woods they halted.

"By the sweet harp of David, Natty! where 'av you been all these years?"

"Knockin' 'round the world like a chip on the sea

—been everywhar—knocked at your cabin door this mornin'."

"Good! good! what news from home? is my—"

"Polly's safe with Ada Bronson down at Hangin' Rock—Scar-Face Saul left 'em thar not many hours ago."

"Joyful tidin's!" shouted Occident; "but, Natty, the devil's to pay and he wants it in blood and we hav'n't a drop to spare."

"Yes, Occi, times are frisky as the helm of a hornet. I've had a couple old-time, rip-roarin' fights in the Occidental Ranch to-day; and I'd got the dockyments for a journey over Jordan if that Scar-Face Saul, and Ingin Topeka, hadn't filed an objection when they did."

"Natty, I must go straight to my child—my Polly."

"Tread cautiously, friend Occident, for the red-man fillet the woods like musical musketeers."

"Yes, I know it, Natty, and I'm afraid many brave settlers' scalps hang at savage girdles this minute. In gittin' away from a place called Fort Rane, where a number of us war jugged, we become separated, but 'd ranged to meet at my cabin. Scar-Face and Topeka are the only ones of a dozen heard from yit, and I'm afraid that the others are in trouble. But, come, let's go out to the river and steal down to Hangin' Rock."

Together they wended their way back to the river. The tall trees along the south bank cast their shadows nearly across the stream. Only a narrow ribbon of light stretched along the shore upon which they stood, and across this "milky way" they could see little waves chasing each other. Something disturbed the water. The two hunters listened. The faint murmur of voices and the dip of paddles were audible. Out in the shadows a boat was making its way up-stream.

After several minutes' silence, Occident whispered: "Natty, did ye hear that?—swear I believe it war my Polly's voice—there, hark-ee!"

A canoe, with a single occupant, glided across the line of moonlight and touched the shore within a few paces of where the bordermen stood. The occupant landed, beached the boat and then turned and hurried away into the woods.

"By the harp of David!" whispered Occident, excitedly, "who can that be? he war a white man, sure—ah, I hear 'em voices over thar yit, and I tell you my Polly's thar."

"Wal, my old daisy, thar's a canoe and what's to hinder you from goin' over and findin' out?"

"Nothin'—come on," said Occident, and a minute later the two were in the boat and moving across the water like phantom boatmen.

When they reached the opposite shore they heard the unknown voyagers above them. Occident turned and pulled after them until he was within speaking distance of the stranger when they stopped to listen.

Again Occident heard Polly's voice, and in his excitement he shouted her name aloud.

Polly heard, and, recognizing the voice of her father, answered it, adding:

"Oh, father, come quick! Rupert Hall is—"

Here her words were cut short by her male companion, Paul Devore, who said:

"It may be a pack of savages."

"No, Mr. Devore, I know it's father," persisted Polly.

"I'll take no chances," the man replied, surlily; "better that the living than the dying be saved,"

and rising, he deliberately lifted the body of Rupert Hall and threw it into the river.

A scream burst from the maidens' lips. Polly sprung forward and endeavored to arrest the desperate Devore's inhuman act. She clasped her arms about Rupert's form, but her puny efforts availed nothing, and, losing her balance, she fell overboard with the wounded man—a loud plunge in the water following her scream.

"My God!" cried Occident, and with a superhuman effort he struck the water with his paddle with such force that the blade was snapped in two. "Natty!" he continued, in a despairing tone, "my paddle's broke! In the name of goodness, what'll I do?"

"Here! here!" suddenly exclaimed a wild, gruff voice in the blinding darkness alongside of them; "take my paddle and pull—pull, you helpless mortals!"

The two bordermen were startled by the strange voice, but not a moment was to be lost, and seizing the paddle, Old Occident sent his boat flying up the river. In a few moments they came up with the bateau, and its two occupants.

Devore dropped the oars and picked up his gun.

"Hold, man!" cried Natty, "we are friends!"

"Polly, Polly, where are you, child?" shouted Occident.

"Polly is in the river! go quick, or she will drown!" cried Ada Bronson, wild with excitement.

"My heavens! what have I done?" exclaimed Devore seized by a sudden remorse. "Oh, God! I thought we were pursued by savages!"

A groan burst from Occident's lips, and without further words he turned his canoe and began searching the dark river for his child, leaving Natty upon the bateau with Devore and Ada.

Devore appeared beside himself with fear and confusion when he had had time to reflect upon what he had done; and to add to his shame and mortification, Ada rebuked him with pitiless scorn and contempt for his inhuman cowardice in throwing Rupert Hall overboard.

"There was no hope for Hall," he said, in justification of his act, "and I threw him into the river to save you girls, and Polly went overboard with him. Of course, I could not save her then."

"Polly told you, Paul Devore, that it was her

father coming. You are a double murderer!" cried the indignant Ada.

Paul Devore groaned under this terrible accusation.

"Well, we musn't tarry here," said Natty; "the woods are full of the reds. Let us git into deeper shadows."

Devore turned the bateau toward the opposite shore. Every stroke of the paddle seemed to wring a sigh from his guilty heart.

They had gone but a short way when a canoe with three occupants crossed their path. Devore uttered a low whistle, when the stranger came to a halt.

"Thank the Lord," said the luckless Paul, "it is Captain Arnold Bush!"

"And two friends," added Bush, for he it was, true enough.

In a moment the three men were alongside the bateau.

"I see you are not alone, Paul," said Bush.

"No, Miss Bronson and a Mr. Thorne are with me."

"Ada, I thank the Lord, that you are safe!" exclaimed Bush, joyfully; "allow me to congratulate you. We have had a long and perilous hunt for you."

He leaped into the bateau as he spoke, and grasping Ada's hand kissed it with knightly devotion. Ada did not resent this slight familiarity, for she, too, was delighted to know that friends were around her.

The maiden's first inquiry was of her father; but, Arnold Bush could not give a satisfactory answer. They had parted at Fort Rame with the understanding they meet at the cabin of Old Occident, and thither Bush suggested that the party now make its way. Natty objected to this, but the majority was against him and the two boats at once headed downstream. On the way, Devore narrated his adventures with the Wild Man and the fate of Rupert Hall and Polly.

Arnold Bush seated himself upon the thwart by Ada and gave her his constant attention. He narrated all their adventures from the time the party left the settlement up to that time, concluding by expressing the belief that the worst was over with and that they could start home on the morrow.

The party had not made more than half the distance to the cabin when they spoke a canoe ascending the river; and, to the joy of all, it contained, not only Old Occident, but his daughter Polly, well and alive, Scar-Face Saul, Topeka, the Pawnee; also, the dog Monk, who had rescued Polly from a watery grave.

Nothing of Rupert Hall could be found and he was given up as lost.

Occident and party concurred in Bush's suggestion to return to the cabin, and in a few minutes all were under the roof of Occident's home except Saul and Topeka who remained outside on guard. These two held a consultation, then separated—Topeka entering the woods south of the cabin and Saul going north.

Then silence settled over wood and plain. The moon dropped slowly into the west and the shadows shifted from point to point.

Those in the cabin waited and watched for the coming of their friends. Arnold Bush and his men, and Old Occident and Natty, passed in and out frequently. They went out to listen and reconnoiter.

The moon hung just above the treetops when a light canoe touched the southern shore of the river a few rods above Occident's cabin. The boatman was an Indian half-breed. He wore an entirely Indian outfit with the exception of an old, slouched hat.

Landing the fellow beached his canoe and taking a position within the black shadows of a tree, he listened. Presently he heard a light footstep near and the next moment a shadowy form floated from the wood and approached him.

The darkness concealed the features of the two men from each other, but there seemed to be an understanding between them for the half-breed, advancing and taking the hand of the other in a familiar way, said:

"Well, ye're here, pard—made up yer mind yit to take ther saddle ag'in? Can I call yer Con Robber once more?"

"That's just as you please," replied the other.

The half-breed started back at sound of his companion's voice, as if from the hiss of a serpent.

"Ye not Conrad Robb, ye thief, and ye shall die, deader'n—"

The man had attempted to draw his pistol, but received a blow in the face that sent him to earth. Following up his advantage, the stranger drew a knife and leaped upon the foe. There were a few dull blows, a groan, a death-rattle and then all became silent as the dead, save the murmuring river.

The victor straightened himself up and sheathed his knife. Then a sigh escaped his lips. It seemed a sigh of remorse for his awful deed.

The man was suddenly startled by the sound of approaching footsteps, and stooping, he picked up the renegade's hat and put it on and then stepped into the deeper shadows.

Just then the advancing stranger approached the spot where he stood, in a hurry, and said, excitedly: "Corbette, are you here?"

"Here," responded the other in a low, deceptive tone; "kin I now hail ye as Con Robber again?"

"Hark! I am followed," replied the man; "Arnold Bush, them girls and Old Occident are all in the cabin; but Scar-Face Saul and Topeka, cusses upon them, are watching outside. Come, let us cross the river and have our talk, for we must make up our minds and strike to-night or all may slip through our fingers."

So saying the man started toward the river. He

stumbled and fell over the prostrate form of the dead half-breed.

"Hell and furies! what's this mean, Corbette?" There was no response. The man repeated his question and still no answer came, for the other had vanished.

"God in heavens! have I been deceived?" the man exclaimed aloud, as a horrible suspicion flashed into his mind.

Stooping he took the dead man's hands and dragged him into the moonlight; and then as he bent his gaze upon the dead face, a cry of horror burst from his lips. It was his friend, Corbette, and upon his breast was a slip of paper bearing upon it those terrible words:

"Vengeance is mine and I will repay."

No sooner did the man read the terrible threat than he turned and bounded away in the woods like a frightened deer, as if from the terrible avenger himself.

For the next hour a deathly silence reigned along the river; then the sound of fire-arms rolled through the night, and was followed by savage yells. At intervals they were repeated, but each succeeding time they seemed to be nearer.

A shadowy figure crept from the woods near where Corbette's body lay, and looked up the stream whence the sounds came. It was the figure of an Indian. It was Topeka, the Pawnee.

A little ways further up the stream another face peered out into the moonlight with big, blazing eyes. This was the face of Scar-Face Saul, the hunter.

Both these men had been drawn there by the sounds approaching from up the river; nor were they there a moment too soon, for a boat with a single occupant—a great, bearded, half-nude man—went flying down the stream, its oars flashing in the moonlight like snowy wings. And on in swift pursuit came three canoes filled with wild, excited redskins.

Down past the watchers by the shore glided the pursued and pursuers, but the moon suddenly dropping behind a cloud-bank shut them from view and drew the curtain over the night's wild tragedy.

CHAPTER X.

A SECRET CONFIDED TO ADA.

FROM the river Scar-Face Saul wended his way back to the cabin. He entered, sat down and maintained his usual stoical silence—speaking only when spoken to in answer to some question.

He found Ada Bronson weeping. Her young heart was full of grief and bowed down with sorrow. The absence of her father, whom she thought might be dead, made her feel more keenly the loss of her young lover, Tom Rame, the Boy Ranger. Her friends endeavored to cheer her drooping spirit; and none worked so hard as Arnold Bush who tried to make Ada feel that he alone of all the world could make her happy. And he appeared to succeed so well with his ready tongue and tender sympathies that he finally began to flatter himself that she had, at last, found some consolation in one whose love she had rejected so often in time past.

Nor was little Polly less unhappy than Ada. The fate of Rupert Hall weighed heavily upon her mind; but she mastered her emotions, and, although the tears gathered in her eyes now and then, no one could have told but that they were tears of joy.

Such food as the old hunter's larder afforded was placed before the guests, who ate with a keen relish.

Guards kept constant watch outside. Topeka had not entered the cabin at all so ceaseless was his watch over his white friends. Now and then Natty Thorne went out to confer with him.

Natty Thorne's tongue ran incessantly. If he feared danger he did not show it by word or action; but even tried to banish it from the minds of others by keeping up a pleasant conversation, or in telling some of his funny adventures. Finally, however, he said, in answer to a question:

"I don't think this Injin outbreak's anything more'n a raid on a small scale in the interest of some white devil. I am told that's several whites have been seen with the red-skins."

"I am of the opinion," Scar-Face Saul spoke up, "that the notorious Con Robber, outlaw and free-booter, has appeared on the stage of action again, and is rallying his band of cutthroats."

"What reasons have you for thinking so, Saul?" questioned Arnold Bush.

"The same reason that Natty Thorne and Topeka have," replied Saul, a strange meaning appearing in his answer.

"Well," put in Natty, "if that villain wants fun, let him drum up his old band. I'm ready for the racket, boys. I've been there twenty years and the fun I've had can't be calculated by the rule of three."

"I apprehend no trouble from the robbers—" began Bush, but his words were interrupted by Topeka, the Pawnee, who threw open the door and glided into the room.

The Indian's face wore an excited look. There was blood upon his hands and upon the handle of his tomahawk.

"Why, Topeka!" exclaimed Scar-Face Saul starting to his feet, "what is wrong?"

"Injins comin' in the woods, thick—winds whisped a secret to Topeka—pale faces in danger—better go away while can—take to river—heave no trail."

Thus, in a brief moment, was all turned to fear and excitement. Arnold Bush, however, in his usual reckless indifference, advised his friends to keep quiet and give the enemy no reason to believe they were afraid. Moreover, he thought the Pawnee exaggerated the true condition of affairs. But Scar-Face Saul, to whom Old Occident and Natty Thorne instinctively turned as a better authority and a more practical hunter and Indian-fighter, coincided with

the Pawnee, and in a few minutes all were ready for departure from the humble home of Old Occident.

As they filed out of the cabin, Arnold Bush became Ada Bronson's self-appointed escort; that is, he drew her arm in his and led the way toward the river, the others following briskly behind. They reached the water some distance in advance of their friends, and just then a frightful yell arose on the night behind them, and a burst of savage firearms deflected the ears of the fugitives. A score of bullets whistled harmlessly overhead.

The fugitives did not stop to return their fire, but quickened their footsteps.

It had been previously arranged that they all embark in the bateau so they could keep together, but in the darkness and excitement of the moment, so it seemed, Arnold Bush led Ada into one of the canoes and was about to push off when Scar-Face Saul, seeing the mistake, advanced and said:

"You are in the wrong boat, Miss Bronson."

Without one word Ada rose and stepping ashore was conducted to the bateau by the hunter. Arnold Bush followed, muttering an oath in his beard.

Saul and Ada were the last, excepting Bush, to enter the bateau, and just as they had taken their seats a hundred savages, apparently, burst from the woods and darkness and came rushing toward the river.

"Jump, Arnold!" shouted Old Occident who, seeing their danger, plied the oars and sent the craft out into the water. Bush made a leap for the boat as it swung out, but he failed in making it, and the next moment he was seized by the swarm of yelling red-skins.

Out into the river and across to the opposite shore almost, the bateau was driven by three pair of oars. The savages did not attempt to follow, nor did they fire upon the boat. There were those inside of it they wanted alive and unharmed!

Of course, nothing could be done against such fearful odds in behalf of Arnold Bush, and so the bateau turned and pulled up-stream in the shadows of the northern shore. The only object in view now was to endeavor to elude the savages before day, whose coming was now heralded along the eastern sky.

Thus had they journeyed a mile or more up the stream. The red beams of light shooting athwart the east were dispelling the gloom of that dreadful night; the stars were fading in the ambient sky; the invigorating voices of early morn were ringing through the woods; and the fugitives were congratulating each other upon their escape, when, suddenly, a cry burst from the lips of Topeka and his tomahawk fell upon a dark object close alongside the boat in the water.

A wild, savage yell rose on the air as the keen blade sunk to the eye in the cunning red-skin's head; but it was immediately answered by fifty voices that rose from the water around the bateau.

"Harp of King David!" cried Old Occident, "the red devils are in the water! Boys, it's fight or die!"

Topeka uttered a defiant war-whoop. Monk, the great Newfoundland, barked fiercely, and Burr, the faithful companion of Old Occident, sent forth a lugubrious howl, then both leaped overboard and attacked the savages swimming toward them.

The river around the boat was black with tufted heads—all moving toward a common center—the bateau.

And just as the battle opened with a shot from Natty Thorne's revolver, Scar-Face Saul bent over Ada and placing a small package in her hand, whispered:

"If I should fall in the coming battle and you escape, Miss Bronson, open this package. It holds a secret that you—"

The rest of his words were lost in the awful, blood-curdling yell that rose from the water mingled with the stunning crash of the fugitives' revolvers.

CHAPTER XI.

A DESPERATE CONFLICT.

IT was a fearful struggle there upon the bosom of the river in the gray of the early morn.

Not a breath of wind was stirring and the din of battle fell thick and heavy upon the air.

The savages were armed with knives only. They were naked with the exception of their loin-cloths, and swam about as rapidly as though in their native element. The yells that pealed from their lips seemed to pierce the very heavens.

The whites poured volley after volley into the advancing demons and the yells of the dying were soon added to the din of the conflict.

Both dogs, Burr and Monk, were in the river doing fearful execution; but, despite the fact that they were met upon every side, the savages pressed on. Two or three succeeded in reaching the bateau and endeavored to seize it, but the craft was too heavily loaded for this, and the next moment pistols flashed in their very faces and they sunk back lifeless. But their places were soon supplied with a dozen others. The circle of moving heads gradually closed in toward the boat, only to melt away from the deadly nucleus under the withering fire of the defenders. A pall of blue, sulphureous smoke hung over the scene of battle. The river under them was beaten and lashed into a foam crested with bloody froth. But one by one the revolvers of the whites were emptied and the struggle became hard to hand, for with clubbed rifles and oars torn from their locks the Spartan band leapt back the red sharks. Never did men fight as those men fought. It is true they had some advantage in being in the boat above the foe; and by keeping them beyond arm's reach, there was no danger of the murderous knives of the red-skins.

High above the din of the struggle the voice of Old Occident rang out, cheering his comrades. Scar-Face Saul, Topeka, and Nat fought in silence. The first two alone kept one side of the bateau clear of the infuriated wretches.

Ada and Polly were crouched in the center of the boat, clasped in each other's arms, and praying for heaven's help. And, as if in answer to their petitions, a boat suddenly rounded the bend in the river above and came sweeping down to the assistance of the bateau.

The new-comers seemed to take in the situation at a glance, and opened a deadly fire upon the dark forms struggling around the boat. But this acquisition to the forces of the whites made the enemy all the more desperate, and as one, the whole band darted toward the bateau and endeavored, by a united effort, to capsize it. And their effort was not without a partial success, for two of the defenders were pitched overboard into the river, and one or two others received slight wounds. The enemy, however, were unable to follow up this advantage, and the next moment they were beaten back, and, panic-stricken, fled to the shore leaving half of their number dead or drowning.

A yell of triumph burst from the lips of Old Occident, and was repeated by the terrible scalp-cry of Topeka, the Pawnee.

"Ho, Occident, old man!" shouted one of the new-comers, running alongside of the bateau; "it is you, my brave comrade, and who else?"

"By the harp of David!" exclaimed Old Occident, but before he could add another word, Ada Bronson started up, crying out:

"Oh, it is my father! my dear father! thank God!" And so it was—Mr. Bronson and four others.

The father stepped into the bateau and embraced his child.

At this juncture a third canoe crept out from the shore and joined the party, with none other than Arnold Bush for an occupant.

"I give the devils the slip," he said, "while you were fighting."

The man's friends cheered him.

At this juncture it was discovered that Scar-Face Saul and one of the settlers were missing. It was they who had fallen overboard during the fight, and what had been their fate no one could tell.

"I'm afraid them boys have gone under," said Natty Thorne; "poor Saul, he was a brave, reckless and daring boy."

The old hunter's words fell upon Ada Bronson's ears, and turning to Natty she asked:

"Did you say Saul had been killed, Natty?"

"I'm afraid so, little one," he replied, with sadness in his tone.

A cry of regret escaped the maiden's lips. Her thoughts at once reverted to the little package the strange, white-haired hunter had given her, as though he had had a presentiment of his coming death.

"Friends," said Old Occident, "it won't do to talk here too long. If them savages should quit running this side of sunset, they may come back and riddle us with bullets; they won't be so easy next time."

"Yes, indeed," added Arnold Bush; "it's the strangest thing in the world they attacked you as they did."

"Not at all," returned Occident; "there are those among us whom they want unharmed; but I know I'm not one of them."

"It's the maidens, no doubt," Bush remarked.

"They want us awful bad," said Polly, who had recovered her usual composure; "or else they wouldn't sacrifice so many valuable lives."

A silence of a few moments followed, then Occident called his two dogs into the bateau, and the three boats headed up-stream.

Scarcely had they gone half a mile when Occident's worst fears were realized; a volley was fired upon them from the shore, and one of the settlers fell dead.

"Pull for that island, boys!" shouted Natty Thorne.

Turning the boats toward the low, sandy island in question, the men at the oars and paddles worked as they never had worked before.

Several more shots were fired from the shore, but none took effect, and without further harm, the island was reached just as the sun burst over the eastern hill-tops.

Behind the trees, bushes and great rocks that covered the spot, the little party took shelter.

"There, now, by the rampin' furries!" exclaimed Natty Thorne, "we're out o' the pan into the fire. Friends, it's going to take some fine work to figger ourselves off of this island. If it weren't for them little angels, I'd say we war in for some luscious sport—just the kind that soots me; and if we don't give 'em rats for breakfast, as it is, why I'm no sooth-sayer, that's all."

"The varmints have spilt my fun in these 'ere diggin's," replied Old Occident; "but I'll follow 'em clear down to the smokin' tropics, but what I have satisfaction."

Quiet reigned along the river for the next half a day. The sun mounted the soft, summer sky, and a gentle breeze came down the river sweet with the odor of forest and plain.

The party breakfasted upon supplies brought from Occident's cabin, and sat down to await the turn of events.

Ada Bronson and her father found themselves alone during the day. They talked over the situation, the past and the future, and when Mr. Bronson, incidentally, mentioned the name of Tom Rane, Ada burst into tears.

"My dear girl," the father, said, consolingly, "you must not give way. You can no longer live in

hopes of ever seeing that noble Boy Ranger, Tom Rane, again."

"Father, do not tell me this!" cried Ada; "he will surely come to me some time—I cannot give him up!"

"But you must, my child. Tom Rane is dead. We found his remains staked to the earth in Fort Rane the night we were camped there. Here is what is left of his memoranda—unquestionable proof of his death."

A sharp cry of agony burst from Ada's lips. She buried her face in her hands and wept as if her heart would break.

Her father endeavored to console her sorrowing spirit, but in vain. Finally Polly came and joined them, and when Mr. Bronson went away, Ada told her sorrow to her.

"Oh, Ada! my sweet sister," said Polly; "I know how to sympathize with you. Do you know, Ada, that I learned to love poor Rupert Hall—that I loved him from the moment he opened his eyes under Hanging rock? And then to think how that cowardly Devore—may heaven punish him!—murdered him! Oh, it nearly breaks my heart, Ada!"

"It is dreadful, dreadful, Polly," sobbed the fair Ada.

"Excuse me a moment, Ada; father is calling me—I'll be back," said Polly, and she hastened to obey her father's summons.

She was scarcely gone when a shadow fell across Ada's path, and a footstep sounded near. Looking up, she saw Arnold Bush standing before her.

"Why, Ada, you've been weeping!" he exclaimed, as if pained by the discovery.

"I am very sad, Mr. Bush; it seems we are all to die at the hands of the cruel savages before we get away from here."

"Ada," said Bush, and there was a great change in the man's voice and looks, "you have it within your power to save us all; do you know it?"

"I save all?" exclaimed Ada, with a puzzled look upon her young face.

"Yes, Ada," he replied, "one word from your lips and we will all go safely home."

"I would gladly speak that word to save so many precious lives," said Ada; "but I do not understand wherein I possess such magic power over our foes."

"Perhaps not, Ada; but one thing you do know, and that is I love you, for I have told you so repeatedly, and you—"

"Mr. Bush, would to God it were possible for me to return you my love and be happy; but this can not be. My heart lies buried with another. I would only make you miserable as your wife—miserable as I am now."

"I'll run all risks, Ada," he persisted.

"Mr. Bush, what has this to do with my power over our enemies?"

"Much, indeed; say that you will be my wife as soon as we reach the village, and, barring your love for Tom Rane's memory, I will be happy and trust your honor—trust in you to fulfill your promise. Your consent to be my wife will be you and your friends' passport to the settlement unharmed."

"Then you have influence with the Indians?" she demanded.

"I can secure that influence, which is substantially the same," he responded, with a strange look upon his face.

"Then you must be in—" she began, but her voice failed her, for at this moment her eyes fell upon a beautiful turquoise jewel half hidden under the lapel of the man's coat. She recognized it as having once been her own. It was the same jewel that she had bestowed upon Tom Rane, the Boy Ranger, as a badge of honor for his gallantry in defending Fort Rane and his wonderful skill in marksmanship.

"Arnold"—she finally exclaimed, pointing to the jewel, "where did you get that?"

"Do you know it, Ada?" he said, affecting a kindly tone.

"I do! I do!" she cried; "I gave it to him—to Tom Rane!"

"Indeed! well, I found it in the little sod fort that perpetuates his name," replied Bush, with a tinge of sarcasm in his tone and look.

"There is where he died," and Ada again burst into tears.

"Ada," said the persistent, heartless man, "what is your decision? Yes? or No? Remember what I have promised—safety to all."

"Arnold Bush!" cried Ada, "you are cruel as man could be, but I will do any thing to save my father and friends; but I must confer with them before I answer you."

"Stop!" exclaimed the man, in a low, threatening tone that startled Ada with fear, "stop! you must not see them—you must act upon your own judgment or not at all."

"I will speak with my father!" she declared firmly, all her womanly nature asserting itself.

"Then you do so at your own peril. If I cannot wed you, no other man shall! And you mention one word of what I have said before you answer me and I will—"

Here he broke down. His eyes were blazing like a madman's, and the very spirit of a demon was depicted upon his face.

"Arnold Bush, I thought you were a gentleman," said Ada, reproachfully—her eyes flashing and lips quivering with emotion.

"I have tried to be, Ada Bronson; but you have roused the devil in my heart—fired my brain. I have loved you since the day I first met you fondly, madly—as no man ever loved a woman. I have tried by all the arts of manhood to treat you kindly—to win your love; and you have only toyed with my affections—my love. But I will not be thwarted now—cheated out of you. Let me tell you just one thing, now that

you have driven me to it: *Con Robber, the prairie freebooter and road-agent is not dead!*"

"Neither, sir," said an airy voice that seemed to come from out the realms of nowhere, causing the man and maiden to start, "neither, sir, is Tom Rane, the Boy Ranger, dead!"

CHAPTER XII.

A CLOVEN FOOT.

If Ada Bronson had been startled by the words of Arnold Bush, both she and Bush were more startled by the strange voice that answered the latter. Both glanced quickly around them, but they saw no one near.

A dark frown knitted the brows of the self-declared outlaw.

Ada's brain grew dizzy and a strange feeling came over her. Pale as death she rose to her feet.

"Some cunning persons," said Bush, with an oath, "are going to get themselves into trouble. I will show them that Arnold Bush lives, also."

"Oh, my God!" Ada's heart cried out in silent agony; "can that be a spirit voice? Does my lover, Tom Rane live? Will he ever, ever come back to me?"

While musing thus, a thought occurred to her. She took from her pocket a small package—that given her by Scar-Face Saul just at the beginning of the conflict on the river. She opened it and found on the inside of a buckskin wrapper a little piece of paper upon which was written the following:

"ADA BRONSON: Arnold Bush is a villain—an ex-robber—Con Robber, himself. Furthermore, Tom Rane was not slain in Fort Rane as reported; but you will not see him again this side of the grave. His hand pens these lines which Scar-Face Saul will hand to you. Oh, my God, Ada! you know not what he has undergone, suffered! but forget him. Some day the mystery that clouded your life and his may be revealed. Farewell, Ada."

"Your affectionate

"Tom Rane."

The letter fell at Ada's feet. A mist gathered over her eyes. She reeled and sunk unconscious to the earth. Arnold Bush saw her fall. He advanced, picked up the letter and glanced quickly over it. His hand trembled, his lips quivered, his face grew ashen pale. Thrusting the paper into his pocket, he called for help. Mr. Bronson, accompanied by others, hastened to Ada's side.

"My poor child!" cried the father, "what has befallen her?"

"Her strength has been overtaken," said Bush, trying to appear calm; "the constant excitement of the past few days has been too great a strain upon her nervous system. It will require tender care to revive her under her depressed condition."

They carried her to the east side of the island where the trees and shrubbery concealed them well from view of either shore. The canoe in which Ishmael Bronson and party had descended the river was drawn from the water under a canopy of bushes and a bed of leaves and grass made in it for the maiden.

By the application of such restoratives as the circumstances would afford, the poor girl, after long hours of terrible suspense, was restored to consciousness; and as her bewildered thoughts came back to her, she looked up into her father's face and exclaimed:

"Where is he, father?"

"Whom do you mean, Ada?" the anxious parent inquired.

"Arnold Bush," she answered.

Mr. Bronson looked around for him, but he was nowhere to be seen; so Natty Thorne started in search of him. He looked the island over but could not find him thereon. He ran his eye up and down the river, and none too soon, for he just caught sight of the cattle-dealer as he disappeared among the bushes on the northern shore.

Natty reported to Mr. Bronson, who exclaimed: "What does that mean? Why has Arnold left us in such a stealthy manner? Can any one answer me?"

"Father, Arnold Bush is a bad man," said Ada.

"Harp of David!" exclaimed Occident, "the gal knows somethin'!"

"Silence, Ada," cautioned the father, "you are weak and excited; you must remain quiet or you'll die."

"But, father, I have a secret to tell you: Tom Rane, the Boy Ranger, is not dead."

"Tut! tut! my child, this is impossible. We buried his remains in the little fort on the prairie."

"Father, there is some mystery about Fort Rane; and I will tell you after a while what occurred before Mr. Bush went away," said Ada.

The little party was not a little puzzled and mystified by their desertion by Arnold Bush, and the cause of Ada's excitement. And as Mr. Bronson had forbade further conversation with his daughter for the time being—until she was in a better frame of mind—they were compelled to abide her recovery for the secret.

Before they were scarcely aware of the fact, night had again set in over the land, and so dispositions were at once made for spending the night upon the island.

The two maidens were prepared a couch in the canoe that Ada had occupied during the day. The low-hanging foliage afforded them ample shelter from the dew, and in this rude couch they were lulled to sleep by the gentle wash of the waves that kissed the prow of the canoe—so close was it to the water's edge.

Guards were posted and by ten o'clock the island was wrapt in silence. About midnight, however, when the moon came up, the wind rose also, and

swept over the forest with a sullen roar and lashed the river into fury. Here and there patches of torn clouds trailed across the sky and at times obscured the moon.

Mr. Bronson wrapped his blanket around him and laid down by the side of the canoe in which his daughter and Polly slept. Ever and anon he would rise and bend over his child and listen, with that paternal anxiety, to her breathing. Finally he fell asleep and slept soundly. When he awoke, the moon had shifted in the heavens so that its rays fell full in his face. He started up in a sort of a bewilderment. His first thoughts were of Ada. He looked from side to side in a puzzled manner. The canoe with the two girls was gone! He sprang to his feet and gazed around him.

"Great God! what does this mean?" he cried out aloud, as he grasped his whirling, throbbing brain; "have I changed position in my sleep? or has the canoe been moved? Oh, my poor child!—my Ada, where—"

"Bronson," interrupted Natty Thorne, started from his sleep by the settler's words, "what in the name of the gracious Peter is wrong here? are you discommoded?—sonnambulistic?"

"That canoe, Natty!—those girls!—my child!—where are they?" the distracted father responded.

"Great harp of David!" groaned Old Occident, awakening from his slumber and learning the situation from Bronson's lips; "there must be some devilish, foul treachery here, friends! No enemy could ever 'a' approached this island with my dogs on it. I tell ye them gals have been sent adrift; there is a traitor on this island!"

The camp was aroused and the island carefully searched, when, to the bitter surprise and disappointment of all, one of the guards, Julian Kale, was found missing. Investigation showed, also, that the canoe had been dragged, with the sleeping maidens, to the water's edge and sent adrift; and as the canoe lay upon the lower side of the island which was guarded by Julian Kale, it was the unanimous opinion that Kale had dragged the boat through the sand to the water and escaped with the sleeping girls.

Julian Kale was one of Arnold Bush's bullwhackers, and since Bush had deserted them so ignominiously, all believed Kale had been actuated by his master's example, and had not only deserted his trust, but had stolen the maidens also.

For the next hour all was excitement and suspense upon the little island. Satisfied that the deserter had gone down the river, the party resolved to start in pursuit as soon as the moon went down, and it was with eager eyes and blanched faces that they watched the great orb sinking slowly in the west. But, finally, she sunk from view behind the far-off mountains and darkness enveloped the forest and river. With subdued voices the party entered the bateau, pushed off and with muffled oars glided down the river.

CHAPTER XIII.

"WHEN ROGUES CALL OUT, HONEST MEN GET THEIR DUES."

WITH Ishmael Bronson and Old Occident at the oars and their minds and hearts fixed upon the rescue of their daughters, the bateau moved rapidly down the river. And how far they would have gone down the stream in this way there was no telling; but they suddenly came upon an empty canoe floating at the will of the current which they recognized as the one in which the girls were spirited away, and which at once changed their course.

Where the canoe had been abandoned they, of course, could not tell; but they did know that it had not been abandoned long; so they landed on the northern shore, beached their boat and sat down to await the coming of day. It was, really, all they could do.

And they had not long to wait.

The night wore away and day burst upon them, clear and warm.

The shore was now carefully searched, and the place where the boat landed its occupants easily found. There were the foot-prints of the maidens in the sandy beach, and also the prints of booted and moccasined feet. This told the pursuers that white-man's devilry and Indian's cunning had been the instruments in the abduction of the girls.

And who else could these white men have been than Arnold Bush and Julian Kale?

And where had they gone?

This last question was the one that now agitated the minds of the friends; but, from the fact that the stronghold of Indian and robber was far to the westward, among the foot-hills of the mountains, was drawn the general and logical conclusion that thither had the enemy gone with their fair captives; and so their trail was taken up and the pursuit begun.

Natty Thorne took the lead. He was an old Indian-fighter, and at home upon the trail.

If the foe had left a broad, plain trail behind them as in following pursuit. It ran in a north-westerly direction, after leaving the river, through a narrow valley. Here the pursuers advanced with caution for fear of an ambush, and the valley had been nearly passed when the report of a pistol on the hillside arrested their attention.

Looking up they saw a man, or rather a boy, standing upon a ledge swinging his hand above his head in an excited manner.

"Harp of David!" exclaimed Old Occident, "it's that boy! that boy, Rupert Hall!"

"It is as true as I am living!" replied Mr. Bronson, "and he appears to be in trouble. Let some of us go up there at once."

Bronson and Occident hastened up the hill toward the boy, the others watching the valley below.

As they approached the boy they saw that his

face was pale and emaciated, that his head was bandaged and his left arm in a sling.

"Great Jericho, Rupert!" cried Old Occident, "this is a happy surprise, for we s'posed you war leader 'n old Adam and his rib."

"I am not much better than a dead man," the youth responded.

"But how in the name of mercy did you escape from the river when Devore flung you overboard?"

"I was picked up by the Wild Man of the Swamp, who now lies yonder, dead," and he pointed to the motionless form of a man lying near and covered with leaves and green boughs.

An exclamation of surprise burst from the two men's lips, and advancing, they drew aside the boughs and looked down into the face of the dead. The body was half naked. The face was covered with a long matted beard. The head was bloody; there was an ugly, gaping wound upon it. His great limbs were naked, scarred and lacerated.

"It is Jack Marley, true enough," said Mr. Bronson.

"Yes, it is poor, unfortunate, wicked Jack," added Rupert; "and a dreadful night of it I have had with him here before he died. Poor fellow! he has been crazy ever since he left Prairie Hill, and after he rescued me last night, he carried me in his strong arms, as if I'd been an infant, to this spot, and how much further he'd taken me I do not know had he not fallen with me and struck his head against that stone. He lay unconscious a long time, and when he recovered he cried out, 'Have mercy! have mercy! I will not betray you!' I assured him that I was his friend—that I would not betray him. He seemed lost—in bewilderment; but all the time he imagined he was surrounded by enemies who wanted to kill him. It was an hour before I could get him to understand the situation he was in, when he started up, exclaiming: 'My God! then I have been sleepin'—or crazy!' I told him he was known as the Wild Man of the Swamps, at which he seemed surprised—astounded. He asked me how long he had been absent from Prairie Hill, and when I told him he replied that all that time had been a blank to him up to that hour. It seemed that his fall against the stone had removed the cloud from his mind, and after he had told me his story, I knew his head or skull had been crushed in by a blow with a club, and a portion of the skull pressing on the brain had produced insanity. Oh, what a story he told me!"

"Well, tell it, Rupert," said Occident.

The three sat down and Rupert began:

"The first thing he told me was that Arnold Bush was Conrad Robb—the outlaw, Con Robber himself—"

"Harp of David! my s'picious are comin' out true," interrupted Occident.

"And Julian Kale is one of his men," added Ishmael Bronson.

"Yes," continued Rupert, "and Marley admitted that he had been one of Con Robber's gang, though he was never a very active member, and for that reason was not in the best of standing in the band. The last act of the outlaws, he said, was the murder of Tom Rane, the Boy Ranger. The youth had crossed the captain's path in a love matter; besides had given the gang some trouble in their attempt to capture an emigrant train. For this the robber-chief swore vengeance on Tom, and the very day he left the emigrants the young ranger fell into the outlaw's hands. He was captured in a little sod fort on the open prairie, and with extended limbs they bound him to the earth for the purpose of torturing him to death. But before the awful work had begun the troopers charged upon them. The robbers discharged their revolvers at the prostrate body of the boy, vaulted into their saddles and fled. As they never heard of Tom Rane again, of course they had not a doubt but that he had been killed. But, after that night, the captain concluded it was best to disband the brotherhood, for a time at least, and lead an honest life. To this the band all consented, and, as there was a young lady at Prairie Hill with whom the captain was in love, this fact fixed his location, and he went into the cattle business. As he had always gone in disguise when a robber-captain, no one knew Arnold Bush as the late Con Robber but his own followers—a dozen or so of whom he retained in his employ as ranchmen. Among the number was Jack, himself. He thought Jack'd make a good citizen as he had always made a poor outlaw. Every thing worked like a charm in their life of honesty except Arnold Bush's love affair with Ada Bronson."

"For which I thank God!" broke in the father of the maiden.

"And when he found," Rupert went on, "that he could not win her love by all his artful science, all of his brutal, outlaw spirit came back to him and he resolved to accomplish by force what he could not do by fair means. He proposed to his men that they all go back to the saddle—in other words revive the brotherhood of outlaws. Every man favored the proposition except Marley. They coaxed, then threatened, but all to no purpose. Jack could not be moved. One night he went down to Strahl's Agency and got to drinking and picked a quarrel with Scar-Face Saul, who'd stopped in at the agency for something to eat. The result was that Saul whipped him pretty badly, and humiliated by the same, he got still drunker and swore 'vengeance was his and he would repay.' That night when he went to the ranch he found Arnold Bush waiting him. Bush told him that he could take his choice—rejoin their band or hang. He told then he would never turn outlaw again, but promised them he would never betray them; he said that all he wanted was to be avenged upon Scar-Face Saul. But this would not satisfy the inhuman Arnold Bush. A paper was brought out for Marley to sign with

his own blood as the others had done; but he refused. A rope was then brought in and one end put around his neck. Jack broke away from them and attempted to escape, but some of the party threw a heavy rock which struck him upon the head and felled him, unconscious. And this was the last of which he remembered, only in a sort of a vague, dreamy way, from that hour up to this. How he ever escaped from the outlaws with his life was a mystery to him. Nor did he know what power had led him, a frantic lunatic—madman—avenging spirit—over the country, unless thoughts of revenge had been so firmly impressed upon his mind before it became clouded, that the body went on obeying the will of the mind that afterward became clouded. Oh, it was a sad, sad story, Mr. Bronson."

"Yes, indeed," responded the settler; "but his story reveals the mystery of the 'Avenging Nemesis.' But, it does seem singular that a crazy man could go on and do such miraculous things as have been accredited to him, and all the while the world be a blank to him. It is very singular, I say."

"Ah, Mr. Bronson," said Occident, "it is one of those strange, mysterious and unaccountable freaks of nature in a madman, when a man has all the strength, cunning and instincts of the brute. Poor Jack Marley! he war a rough old coon—a bitter pill, but he has sartainly paid the penalty at the bar of his Maker. Let us bury him as best we can and push on. Every moment's delay gives the foe that much start of us."

"Then you are in pursuit of savages?" observed Rupert.

"Yes—those that have Ada and Polly again in their power."

"They passed along the valley not over an hour ago," exclaimed Rupert. "I saw they had two female captives, but I did not recognize either Ada or Polly from here. But I did recognize Arnold Bush, Paul Devore and Julian Kale with the Indians."

"Then we may overtake them if we hurry on," declared Occident.

"Yes, yes," echoed Bronson, "let us lose no time. But we are Christians and must show respect to this poor lump of clay."

Those in the valley were called up and told the story of Jack Marley's death, then a shallow grave was hollowed out under the rock and all that remained of the Wild Man of the Swamp was laid away to its final rest.

Scarcely had these sad rites been concluded when a remarkable sound suddenly rolled up from the valley. Bronson started with a look of joyful recognition upon his face, and Burr, with a sharp bark, darted away.

"By the harp of the dancing David! that war the bray of my mule Daisy, I'll bet a raccoon skin.—Ah! look! by hokey, look, you offsprings of your mothers!—thar comes that old angel flyin' down the valley 'ith head and tail aloft! and as God is my jedge, thar's a female woman onto her back!—and great agers! it's my Polly! my delicious Polly! Ho, Polly! Stop, Polly—Polly!"

Polly heard the shout and looked up. She saw the men on the hillside, and her father flying down toward her like a madman. She reined in. Daisy was dripping wet and covered with foam. She had been hard ridden, as all could see.

Old Occident was soon at the side of the mule with his Polly in his arms, and tears of pure joy coursing down his brown, wrinkled face.

The others came up and joined the happy pair.

A glad cry of joy burst from Polly's lips when she saw Rupert Hall alive. The youth advanced and greeted her with boyish fervency.

"Where is Ada, Polly?" gasped Mr. Bronson as he came running up almost out of breath.

"She is a captive in the power of the Indians I am sorry to say, Mr. Bronson," she replied; then turning to her father asked, "Father, do you know Arnold Bush is an outlaw?"

"Yes, my child, I do; but is Ada well?"

"She was quite well when I left, and tried to escape when I did; but her horse was so slow in starting that Bush seized the reins. But, Daisy shot off like a bird, and, oh my, how she did run! I looked back and saw Bush jerk Ada off her horse and start in pursuit of me upon it; and he would have overtaken me, too, if his horse hadn't been shot under him by some one away over on the prairie ever so far. I saw the puff of smoke from the man's gun, and the man himself, but I couldn't tell who he was, he was so far away."

"Long Shoot!" exclaimed Topeka, his black eyes sparkling with some secret joy, and a strange smile flitting over his face.

"Who's Long Shoot, 'Peka?" asked Natty Thorne; but the Pawnee made no answer and turning he glided away up the valley in the direction Polly had come.

"What now's in the wind?" asked Occident looking after the friendly.

"There are several Indians and outlaws following me on foot, father," said Polly; "and they'll soon be down in the head of the valley."

"That so? Then by the dust of Adam," cried Occident, "we'd better move ahead and give 'em a reception when they enter the woods. It's not far to the edge of the prairie."

"But good sakes, men! Rupert Hall can't travel along with us, and we dar'n't leave him here alone," exclaimed Natty Thorne.

"He can ride Daisy, then," and Polly looked at him wistfully.

"No, no, Polly; you cannot walk. I will walk," replied the youth; "go on and save Ada, and I'll take my chances—"

"I can walk, Rupert, fast as the men; can't I, father?" put in the brave little girl.

"Climb onto that darlin' ole Daisy, Rupert," ordered Occident, "and I'll risk Polly's keepin' along 'ith us. I've known her to skim over hills and mountains a hull day at a time like a mountain chamoi huntin' berries, or go boundin' over the prairie like a fairy in s'arch of wild flowers. So, jist you climb onto that ole angel jackson and see how smilin'ly she'll float ye along, boy."

Rupert was assisted to the back of the mule and then the party started off up the narrow, winding valley. As they advanced the woods grew more open and finally the prairie burst into view; but the party did not venture into it. They stopped and sent Natty Thorne forward to reconnoiter. The old borderman crept to a point where he could command a fair view and took in the situation. Before him lay a broad expanse of prairie covered with green grass and beautiful flowers. It was really the bottom-land of a great bend in the Cheyenne river. Beyond was the river and a belt of dense, scrubby timber. Near the center of the landscape was the point of a long ridge jutting down from the great prairie to the north. This point broke up into a cluster of little hills that looked, in the morning sun, like the short, choppy waves of the ocean. Upon the summit of one of those motionless waves Natty saw a little group of persons standing; and between him and that group, and nearer to him, he saw five Indians coming toward the entrance to the valley. These red-skins, he knew were following Polly, and the group beyond upon the prairie billow were waiting their return.

As Polly's pursuers approached, Thorne saw that their faces were painted and their heads plumed in all the paraphernalia of the war-path. It was yet early in the morning. The dew was on the grass and the air quite cool, so that each of the savages found it comfortable to wear his handsomely wrought, but dirty blanket about his shoulders.

As Natty took in the situation a grim smile passed over his face, then turning he glided back to his friends.

"They're comin', boys, five of the sweet-scented dandelions," he announced, "and an idea has poked itself into my noggin'."

"Out with it, Natty," Mr. Bronson enjoined.

"Ambush ourselves and spring a few 'tigers' onto the varlets."

"Good, Natty!" answered Bronson, "anything to win."

"Occident, do you think you can keep that lousy old mule quiet? and that ornery Burr dog from snarlin'?"

"Leave them to me, friend Natty," replied the old borderman.

A few minutes later the valley seemed deserted by every vestige of life, save the birds that twittered among the branches and sung their morning carols as though all was "peace on earth and good will to man."

CHAPTER XIV.

ARNOLD BUSH AT BAY.

PATIENTLY Arnold Bush and his companions in sin waited, upon the little summit in the prairie, the return of those dispatched in pursuit of Polly and Old Occident's frolicsome mule. That they would succeed in recapturing them, the outlaw had not a single doubt. For a girl to elude five skillful warriors was impossible!

But, Arnold knew not what difficulties were likely to beset the way of his red allies. Nor did he care so that his own selfish ends were served. He had been transformed from the gentlemanly ranchero to a vicious, profane villain; and when his horse had been killed under him by some unknown person hiding in the tall grass, his fury became almost violent. He cursed and swore like a madman—stamped the ground with impotent rage; but a bullet whistling close to his head warned him that the eye of that unknown marksman was upon him—that he was in danger; and hurrying back to his friends he dispatched the five savages in pursuit of Polly.

He was on the highest knoll of the group. He was like the eagle; he had sought the most commanding point for his eyrie. To the west of him, and the east, and the south, circled the Cheyenne river forming a great horse-shoe bend. Its shores were lined with thick scrubby timber that would afford a good concealment, and under its cover the outlaw longed to be.

Poor Ada sat shivering. Full well she knew that a man who could change his character from an angel, as it were, to a furious demon, was to be feared; and when she saw that the number of her captors was greater than that of her friends, her heart sunk in her breast and her hope of rescue faded. And she felt all the lonelier and more desolate after Polly escaped. She was not permitted to go beyond Bush's reach. Her sobs were mocked with words of hypocritical consolation. Her captor stood over her, pistol in hand, with his eyes fixed upon the east. He was watching for the return of his friends.

More than three hours passed in thus waiting and watching, and Bush had grown desperately anxious and uneasy, when at length a number of persons put in an appearance on the edge of the plain east of them. All readily recognized them as Indians—their friends; and to their joy they saw, also, that there was a horseman in their midst.

A shout burst from the outlaw's lips.

"Polly, Miss Bronson," he said, his voice evened with the sarcasm of a gloating fiend, "has been recaptured, I am happy to inform you."

Ada made no reply. She did not know whether to rejoice or cry over the information imparted to her.

The party approached slowly—at least, it appeared so to the restless Arnold Bush. The tall grass made it difficult walking and half concealed their forms

from view; but the mule, Daisy, and the maid, Polly, were easily recognized when a mile away.

"May the devil take the poking vagabonds!" Bush finally exclaimed, his restless spirit chafing in his desire to be moving on toward safer quarters; "old women could travel faster."

"Captain," replied Julian Kale, "it issing'er how awful slow they travel; but then the way is a dead level and it's as fur ag'in as it looks to be. Give 'em time, captain; big bodies move slowly, they say."

"They're acting as if they were lazy or drunk," growled Bush, "that's all I've got to say about it. Old Occident and his gang 'll be on us like a pack of jackals afore we get to the hills if we don't stir our boots faster'n that."

"They do 'pear to be creepin' long kinder slow," declared Devore.

"Slow?—furies!" hissed the outlaw; "maybe, now, it will hurry them up a little if we start on. What do you say, boys?"

"We can try it."

And so they moved on, Bush conducting Ada.

The savages with Polly quickened their pace, and the others saw it.

"That stirs the moping louts," observed Bush, "so we'll keep on slowly."

In descending the hill, those behind were hidden from view, but, when the plain below had been reached, Bush turned and looked back. To his surprise he saw Polly Occident mounted upon her father's mule, upon the summit of the knoll they had left a few minutes previous. She was alone—not one of her savage escorts could be seen. And she was waving her hat as if signaling to some one.

"Kale, what's that mean?" demanded Bush.

"Somethin' wrong, captain; I reckon the girl couldn't have escaped from the boys again?"

"No, or she'd never have come toward us," declared Arnold. "I tell you there is something wrong!"

"Ugh!" suddenly ejaculated one of the Indians pointing westward, "friends come with pony."

Looking around, Arnold saw two savages approaching upon horseback at a loping gallop. He took off his hat and waved it in an excited manner. The Indians rode faster. They soon came up and dismounted; when Bush, with an authoritative air said, excitedly:

"Give me these ponies. Miss Bronson, we will ride."

Poor Ada! she saw what the man was up to, but there was no remedy. She was assisted to the back of one of the animals and Bush mounted the other. They were ready to start.

At this juncture Polly's captors were seen coming around the knoll on the left.

The Indians and outlaws scanned them closely.

"By heavens, men! they are not Indians!" cried the outlaw chief; "they are our enemies in disguise. They have murdered our friends and put on their clothes. That accursed Old Occident has outwitted them, and is now after us. But, by Judas, he shall not get us. Boys, I am going to make sure of this girl, and the only way to do so is to hustle her off at once. When I get into your woods, which extend to the foot-hills, I will defy Old Occident to follow us. Now, boys, look out for yourselves and make every shot count. Remember some of them fellows are good shots, and armed with long-range rifles."

With this the outlaw and Ada rode away at a full, sweeping gallop. Every spark of hope was now driven from the maiden's breast; but she bore up under her grief bravely—allowing no word or look to betray her utter despondency of heart.

The report of firearms falling upon the fugitives' ears told them that those behind had come to blows. For, as Bush had discovered, it was Occident and party in disguise who had stolen a march upon them. The settlers had killed every savage; then, by the suggestion of Natty Thorne, the disguise-stratagem was resorted to—with what success we will soon see.

Arnold Bush did not care much whether his friends escaped or not, so that he got away safely with his lovely prize; but, as he galloped along, every breath he drew was one of pain and fear. His eyes roved the prairie constantly, for he could not forget that there was a hidden marksman somewhere about, who seemed to have made him an especial target when on the knoll.

By sending Polly forward onto the knoll, after they saw the enemy leave, Old Occident hoped to divert the attention of the foe so that they might steal around the base of the hill and take them unawares. But in this they were somewhat disappointed; and when Mr. Bronson saw Bush ride away with his child, his spirit seemed utterly crushed.

"My God!" he groaned. "See! Arnold Bush has taken Ada and fled on horseback!"

"Charge, men!" yelled Old Occident, and with a shout the little party advanced at double quick. The Indians and outlaws retreated, notwithstanding their force was superior in numbers. But they feared Occident and his dogs as they did a family of bears.

The settlers ran for some distance, then stopped and fired upon the foe—bringing down one of their warriors. Then a running fight was kept up for some time, the settlers "winging" a foe at nearly every discharge of their long-range guns. The enemy returned the fire, but their bullets fell wide of the mark. Julian Kale and Paul Devore both finally went down—victims of their own foul treachery. The others, seeing the fate sure to befall them if they attempted to hold the settlers back, that Bush might make good his escape, scattered out and sought safety in flight. This left Bush's trail open to the pursuers.

Meanwhile, the outlaw chief and Ada were moving rapidly away toward the sullen-browed foot-hills. They crossed the river at an Indian ford and entered the timber bordering the stream. They had gone

but a short way from the river when a man suddenly stepped out into the path before them, and leveling a rifle at Arnold Bush's breast, exclaimed:

"Stop!"

"My God! don't shoot! don't shoot!" begged the outlaw, terror-stricken by this unexpected danger in the moment of his triumph.

"It is Scar-Face Saul!" exclaimed Ada. And Scar-Face Saul it was, true enough!

"Hands up, Arnold Bush," commanded the white-haired hunter, never moving a muscle, nor his eye from its range along that glimmering gun-barrel: "hands up, I say, or die!"

Bush was a coward when cornered. The deadly blaze of that strange, silent man's eye told him that there was no alternative; so he threw up his hands—from the proud, tyrannical captor at once changed to the terror-stricken, humiliated captive.

"Miss Bronson," said the motionless hunter, "take those pistols from your gallant's belt, will you, please?"

With trembling hand, Ada reached out, and lifting the weapons from his belt threw them into the brush.

A convulsive shudder ran through the frame of the outlaw. He ground his teeth and looked the vengeance he could not speak.

"Now, dismount," ordered Saul, lowering his rifle.

Bush meekly obeyed.

"Arnold Bush," and the hunter advanced toward the outlaw, "are you prepared to settle accounts with your Maker?"

"Is that any of your business?" Bush found breath to reply.

"I shall make it my business," Saul exclaimed, a deadly light burning in his eyes. "The time has come when I must have revenge upon you, Conrad Robb—outlaw and villain!"

Bush grew whiter, and trembled. But, he mastered his emotions. He entertained a vague hope of deliverance from this man's power by the appearance of his friends.

"You have played your last card, Arnold Bush," Saul continued; "you have plotted and planned for several days and nights to get that maiden into your power. You have sacrificed dozens of lives to accomplish your hellish designs; human lives are nothing to you, you monster. But you attempted the destruction of one life once and failed. You do not recognize me, Arnold Bush, but now—" and the speaker tore from his eyes those green goggles, and from his head a wig of white hair, and confronting the outlaw with a tragic air continued: "but now, perhaps you do!"

Bush started back, clenching his hands and teeth, while Ada, with a scream, sprung from her pony's back, and ran toward the hunter, crying out:

"Oh, it is Tom Rane!"

Bush's lips uttered the name in a hoarse whisper. His face became blanched, yet in his heart he cursed his friends for their slowness in coming to his relief. He felt more keenly now the imminent peril of his situation, for in Scar-Face Saul he recognized the Boy Ranger, Tom Rane, whom he had supposed was dead.

Ada threw her arms about the youth's neck. He stooped and kissed her brow; then he put her gently away, for he would not permit himself to be thrown off his guard.

"Oh, Tom!" the maiden cried, "why have you not told me of this before?"

"Because I am deformed—hideous, Ada," he replied.

"You are not to me, Tom; your heart is not scared! Oh, Tom!" and the maiden, in her joy, seemed to forget that other eyes saw and other ears heard her demonstrations of love; "I have never ceased to love you since the day we parted. I have been true to my vows, and my only wonder now is that love's instinct did not penetrate your disguise. Those eyes, Tom, are the same lustrous eyes of the Boy Ranger, but those glasses deformed them, as those white hairs concealed your youth."

"I wore those disguises that you might not, under any circumstances, recognize me—others, too, as well as you. As to the hideous mask I wear upon my face, I am indebted to Arnold Bush for it."

"I see now that it is the mistake of my life that I did not cut your throat," hissed Bush.

"You see your mistake now, of course," replied Saul; "but it is my turn, now. Your intentions were to have killed me the night you pinned me to the earth in Fort Rane; but, unfortunately for you, the soldiers came upon you before you were aware of their approach. You were compelled to flee, but as you rode away a dozen of you fired at my body. Of course, you knew not the result, but let me tell you, you wounded me severely. The soldiers swept on past the fort in pursuit of you; they knew nothing of my being there, helpless, wounded, bleeding, dying. Think of it, you villain; I was left there, all alone to stare up into the October sky. But presently I heard a wolf howl, and it wasn't far away. When I heard it again it was nearer to me, and every time it howled it came closer and closer, and finally it reached the entrance to the fort and sent forth a lugubrious howl that was answered from different quarters by its mates. And, finally, when those mates came up, it grew bolder and ventured inside, and sniffed around me and then took hold—buried its fangs in my face—my cheek—right there, Arnold Bush. I screamed and it let go; but it soon renewed the attack—it and its mates. Ah! but it was a bitter struggle, Arnold—the very tortures of hell. I was being eaten up alive! The beasts attacked my legs, my arms, my neck and face. I was gnawed and torn by those ruthless teeth; the flesh was being stripped from my bones. I shrieked in my awful agony. The wolves grew thicker. Then I prayed—prayed for help, and it came. Topeka, the

Pawnee, came and drove the wolves off and saved me, bad as I was. He carried me to his hidden home and sewed and patched and doctored me up. And now, you see what I am—what you have done for me. Gods, man! is it any wonder that I have haunted you and your men's footsteps like a Nemesis?"

"You are a murderer, assassin!" cried Bush. "Do you wonder that I, or the Wild Man of the Marsh, should be devils? assassins? avengers?" Saul went on. "Ha, I deceived you when I left that skeleton pinned to the earth in Fort Rane—when I left my diary to confirm my death. And, I see you wear my badge—the jewel that Ada gave me the day we parted on the plains of Prairie Hill. You remember when you took that from my breast, don't you?—when I lay prone upon the earth with my arms extended—helpless?"

"Yes, I remember, and I am sorry I did not take your heart instead," Bush savagely retorted. "No doubt of it, Arnold; but will you please return that badge?"

He tore the jewel from his coat and threw it viciously upon the earth at Saul's feet. The hunter started to pick it up, but he detected Bush in the act of springing upon him, and straightening up, said:

"Stand your ground, Bush."

Ada advanced, picked up the jewel, and, turning, fastened it upon Saul's bosom as she had done once before.

"Ugh! whoop-ee! big catch!" suddenly burst upon the ears of the trio, and then Topeka, the Pawnee, glided from the woods and confronted Arnold Bush with a smile of savage joy.

"This thing, Topeka," said Saul, "has at last come to the end. Take charge of this scoundrel while I talk with Ada."

Topeka drew his hatchet and took his position as guard.

Bush looked around him, then began whistling softly to himself to show his indifference to his situation and his contempt for the Indian.

Saul and Ada walked to a fallen log near and sat down.

"Tom," Ada said, "I never was so happy in my life, and yet I do feel vexed when I think over your long silence."

"As I told you, Ada, I remained in disguise because I was ashamed of myself. I was deformed in face, as I thought—I was absolutely hideous—"

"No, no, Tom; don't say that terrible word," interrupted Ada.

"Well, perhaps I imagined I was worse than I really am, and I may have done wrong in keeping in disguise; but, I did as my conscience dictated—I couldn't help it. I was so afraid that if I made myself known I would be repulsive; infirmities are so to some people. Then I thought, perhaps, you would forget me and—"

"Never, Tom, never!"

"Well, I thought so. You see, I was in such a terrible condition that I didn't know, hardly, what to do. But I concluded the best thing for you was to give the world to understand that Tom Rane was dead, and I succeeded very well. But my love for you was the same, Ada, and I determined to remain near you—stay where I could see you now and then. But in the meantime I have learned that your love for Tom Rane was undying; and oh, had I felt that the Tom Rane that you loved was living, how happy would I have been!"

"I understand, now, the meaning of the note you gave me in which you said I would never look upon Tom Rane again this side of the grave; but I see the brave, generous and noble-hearted Tom Rane before me."

"I had that letter prepared for some time, and just before I gave it to you I had a presentiment that something was to happen, and I wanted you to know, that you might outlive your grief, that I was dead, in one sense of the word, to you; and I wanted you to know, also, that Arnold Bush was a villain that you might be upon your guard. Since the day you were captured at the lake, I have been keeping a constant watch over that man's movements. I knew that if I followed him I would find you, for he is the prime mover in all this Indian trouble. Even while he appeared so solicitous of your welfare, and that of the party at the cabin, the other night, he was holding hourly conferences with his agents outside. I should have shot him several days ago and saved much of your troubles, but the time was not come; moreover, I did not—"

His words were here cut short by a cry from Topeka, and turning he saw Arnold Bush disappear in the woods beyond, pursued by the Pawnee. The villain, watching his chances, had managed to elude the Indian and escape.

"Good heavens!" Saul cried, "that desperado has escaped!"

A few moments of silence followed.

Ada crept close to her lover's side, trembling with fear, for Bush's liberty was danger to her.

Suddenly a yell—then a groan came from out in the woods; then silence reigned again.

The tramp of feet and the sound of voices finally startled the lovers, and turning they saw Old Occident and party, in their Indian disguise, approaching.

Prolonged shouts burst from the settlers' lips when they discovered Ada. Mr. Bronson rushed forward and clasped his child to his breast and embraced her in silent joy. Then he turned to her rescuer to pour out his heartfelt thanks.

"Saul," he began, but stopped there, looked the hunter in the eyes for full a minute, then exclaimed—"My God!"

Saul smiled.

"You recognize me, Mr. Bronson?" he asked.

"It is Tom Rane, the Boy Ranger," he replied.

"What's left of him?"

"For the Lord's sake, boy, I am astounded! Give me, your hand, Tom. Let me touch you to assure myself that I am not dreaming."

"Oh, it is Tom, father!" exclaimed Ada.

Tom extended his hand and received the cordial gripe of Ishmael Bronson, then the others came up and were introduced to the gallant young ranger whose bones all believed they had helped to inter in the little fort on the prairie.

"This solves the mystery of Fort Rane," observed one of the settlers.

"It is solved, but not explained," said Bronson.

Then the young ranger told them his story—sad and terrible as it was; but he would not acknowledge that he was Nemesis, since he had learned the story of the Wild Man of the Marsh. But, the settlers never were fully satisfied that both Marley and Saul had not been pursuing a course of vengeance upon the outlaws—authors of their ills.

While the party were discussing the events of the past, Topeka, the Pawnee, returned with a look of triumph upon his face. At his girdle hung a reeking human scalp that told its own terrible story.

Not a word was said—not even by the Pawnee—for the looks that were exchanged spoke louder than words.

The career of Con Robber, the outlaw, had forever ended.

And thus ended the trials and troubles of the good settlers of Prairie Hill settlement.

The homeward journey now began. Saul had taken possession of the two Indian ponies, and these, with Daisy, furnished a conveyance for the maidens and Rupert Hall. As the moving, guiding spirit in the sudden Indian outbreak was gone, they had a comparatively pleasant journey, and in the course of three days reached home in safety.

Old Occident, and his little daughter, Polly, accompanied the settlers to the village, and there built up a new home. And in the course of time, when Rupert Hall had grown to mature manhood, he took the old hunter's charge off his care—he married Polly. The mule, Daisy, was her heritage—all the old man had to give them; but it was a precious gift to the young people, since Daisy had played an important part in those troublesome days of the past.

And the vows made by Tom and Ada the day the maiden last looked upon the handsome face of her boy-lover were eventually fulfilled. There was a verification of the fact that the soul of the man had not been marred, and that the love of a noble and true-hearted woman could not be shaken by scars which time and a heavy, dark mustache and a light growth of whiskers almost entirely concealed.

In fact, it was the white wig and green goggles that transformed Tom Rane into Scar-Face Saul, more than the scars upon his face.

Topeka, the Pawnee—the noble friend of Tom Rane, found a home under the roof of him whose life he had rescued from the jaws of the wolves on that memorable night; but he staid in-doors little of his time. The instincts of the Indian were too strong in his nature to be confined, and he spent most of his time in hunting and fishing, or wandering about from post to post—leading a nomadic life, as hunter, scout and prairie pilot.

And last, but not least: Natty Thorne and Old Occident—no creations of a romancer's fancy, are still rambling over the great plains of the west, or among the hills—drifting, ever and anon, back to the roof of Rupert and Polly, and visiting with their many warm friends at Prairie Hill. At last accounts, however, they were preparing to try their luck in the Black Hills gold region at mining, and thither we may follow them, dear reader, at no distant day.

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